MOTION SICKNESS

Stories

by

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54,232 words

A thesis presented for the Bachelor of Arts degree
with Honors in Creative Writing
The Department of English
University of Michigan
Winter 2024
Readers: Cody Walker and David Ward
For my family. For Claire.
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"You wanted things and you couldn’t help it, because there was only your life, only yourself to wake up with, and how could you ever tell yourself what you wanted was wrong?"

Emma Cline, *The Girls*
MOTION SICKNESS
When everyone thinks the world is ending, we leave health class—Zulie fakes a cramp, Anais fakes the runs—and reunite upstairs in the bathroom, where we hit Anais's vape a few times each—because what are they going to do? Suspend us? Girl, Anais says, with old Mrs. Satterfield, where there's a will there's a way—and we both agree that if this really is the apocalypse, we'll weather the end times barricaded in Zulie's bedroom, rationing off the bulk box of baked Lays in her closet, watching the sunset get redder and redder each night until the ozone layer bursts into stardust and the moon falls from heaven onto the house—which, of course, has been the plan since we were young. Something about the necrotic superstench in the bathroom—cherry cola plus the fresh shit in the handicap stall—makes it a bit easier to stomach the fact that this will probably be the last high school memory we'll ever share. If it were any other day, we'd be gone by now, sitting in the Sonic parking lot, our limbs unwound onto the dashboard of Anais's Saturn, blowing this cherry cola smoke into the chill March air. Soon, we think, grimly, there will be no Sonic. We're too gorgeous and young to die in a pandemic, Anais says, trying to blow a smoke ring. Zulie says, You think Mrs. Satterfield is old enough to die from the virus? She has emphysema, I think. I feel like she'd croak in a day, and Anais says, She doesn't deserve the attention. Anais finally blows a ring, crisp and tubular, that dissipates against the vent. Maybe, we hope, Mrs. Satterfield will smell it from the principal's office and know on
some primordial level we've been talking shit about her. We begin determining the order in which all the teachers would die in the apocalypse—Mrs. Kavin, Ms. Lowe, Mr. Jones, Mrs. Valleja, Dr. Hunter, Mr. Buonaventura, Mr. Brescia, Mrs. Tran, Dr. Adkinson—until the intercom makes an augurous crackle, and we join the exodus of students in the corridor, down the stairs, outside into the brilliance of the ending world.

* * *

In eighth grade, Zulie's color became green. It happened one day in Algebra I when she found out about the Green Lady of Brooklyn. Anais, I want to be her, she said, pointing to the woman on her Chromebook screen. In the picture, the woman was wearing green overalls over a green shirt in a green sitting room with green furniture and, for all we knew, a green dog just out of frame with a green tongue lolling out of its mouth. That day, Zulie happened to be wearing green no-shows. Zules, Anais said, I think it's happening already. Zulie looked down at her socks and, caught up in her sudden excitement, yelped, OH SHIT! All our classmates turned and stared, and from then on Mrs. Kavin began enforcing assigned seating.

Does that make my color pink? Anais asked, later that day on the walk from school to Zulie's house. If yours is green then mine is pink, right?

How does pink go with green?

Like Cosmo and Wanda.

That makes me Cosmo. Zulie looked genuinely offended. I'm Cosmo. You realize that? That squat little bitch is what you see in me? Some friend you are.

Anais laughed so hard she doubled over and clutched her stomach and pleaded, I'm pissing. I'm pissing. Help me, girl, I'm pissing my pants. Four years later, everything is pink and green—our hair ties, our accordion binders, the pepper sprays on our keychains, the beads on our
matching bracelets, our balls at the bowling alley, our clubs at mini golf, our homecoming dresses, our avatars. Zulie once texted Anais a picture of a duplex for rent in California, split perfectly down the middle, one side painted baby pink, the other mint green. Sooooo us, her caption said, and Anais replied, Move in when???????

*   *   *

On an unseasonably warm afternoon, we go to Wildwood. The metropark is one of the few venues we still retain from the old world, besides the Saturn, which has, since the schools closed, become dank with our constant presence, and is perhaps harboring its own unique strain of the virus. We give a wide berth to the Adidas dads with their unleashed Labradors and the Lululemon moms with their leashed children. In return, they avoid us like the plague—Oh wait, we say, then we laugh. We wade through the unsettled soil between trails, collecting thorns and ivy in our socks. We take photos of each other beside the brackish creekwater and complain about the unflattering shadow, the wind tugging at our hair, the Party City bag snagged in the reeds. We don't delete the photos. At a bridge over the brambly lowland, we stop to rest our feet.

Did you see that john back there, following us? Anais asks, vape already in hand.

Following me, you mean, Zulie says.

No, following me.

We go back and forth like this for a moment before Anais says, So I'm hideous. That's what you're saying, I'm too ugly to be followed, and Zulie gestures to the curious ensemble of Anais's outfit—the Chowder pajama bottoms, the Glass City Marathon T-shirt in 4XL, the filthy Birkenstocks with a broken strap—and we laugh so loud a flock of crows in a nearby evergreen breaks through the canopy and rockets into the sky. I think, Anais says after finally composing herself, if we were getting kidnapped, like, chloroform-rag-throw-you-in-a-van kidnapped, I'm
Sorry but I would one hundred percent run away and leave you for dead.

Okay? Zulie says. Don't apologize. I can defend myself. I actually learned a lot from that self-defense thing Mrs. Satterfield made us all suffer through.

Anais looks confused. What self-defense thing? she asks, but she's immediately struck with a beam of memory. Oh, that assembly? With that jacked ex-cop lady? That thing we snuck out of to sit in the car and smoke the piss out of that pre-roll, and then you—Zulie interrupts, Wait, no, hold on, but Anais keeps going—started greening out and then tried to prostrate yourself on my dashboard and pretend to be a Jeep duckie.

Zulie wraps her face in her hands. YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO REMIND ME, she yells.

YOU BROUGHT IT UP, Anais yells back.

Once Zulie calms down, she says, I was obviously being facetious.

"Facetious." Girl, you and your vocabulary.

Like you didn't just say "prostrate" three seconds ago. Don't act stupid.

I'm not taking criticism from Miss Jeep Duckie. Which I'm not done talking about, by the way. Because when you were on my dashboard—the dashboard of my Saturn, by the way, perhaps the furthest away from a Jeep you can get—anyway, when you were up there, you kicked me, like, six times in the head with your fat-ass FILAs, and you were like—and this is my absolute best impression—"DUCKIE DUCKIE DUCKIE DUCKIE QUACK QUACK QUACK," and you don't even know the trauma I grapple with every single day because of that.

Zulie looks unamused. When we get kidnapped, she says, yes, when, not if, you will regret being so cruel to me, your dear friend who has never had an unkind word to say to you.

Anais kisses her teeth dismissively, waving her vape around like a cigarette. When we get kidnapped, she says, we will only escape because the torture of listening to us babble for hours in
whatever keeping dungeon this guy has us in will outweigh whatever pleasure he may derive from killing us.

I like how you imagine us to be held in a dungeon first. Is this because I made you watch *Saw*?

Oh, don't get me started. If we were in *Saw*, we'd bully that weird little fucker on the trike so hard. We'd put his ass in a coma. What's his name? Gigolo?

Zulie's mouth falls open. GIGOLO? Girl. It's *Jigsaw*.

Oh, whatever. You know, whichever of us gets killed first, the other has to kill herself immediately. No exceptions.

What in the— since when did we have a suicide pact?

Girl. How long have we known each other?

Only at this moment do we realize how dark it has grown outside, the gnarled black trees against the orange sky like the mouth of a Jack-O'-Lantern. We could talk forever, we think, and it still wouldn't be enough, because there is simply not enough time in the world to accommodate the volume of things we need to tell each other. Even if we live to be a hundred, talking across the space between our twin deathbeds until we can't speak anymore—even then, in that terrible silence before our final breaths, there will be the dregs of brain activity that can never be translated into words, that we will each experience alone, and that we will carry with us like profound regrets into the afterlife. But tonight, we sit in the Wildwood parking lot on the hood of the Saturn until the moon crests over us with all the stars in tow, and we talk like we're running out of time. We can never know each other, not really, not in the way we need to. And yet. And still.

* * *

* * *
Zulie lives in a spotless colonial in the '15 zipcode, on a cul-de-sac no less. In every room of the house, the walls have been stripped of all their original colors and repainted an even coat of greige, the popcorn ceilings shaved smooth, the wood re-lacquered and stained mellower shades. Every room but the original Tuscan kitchen, a tableau vivant of an older, warmer world amid the sterile open concept. Mrs. C-M has grandiose dreams for the kitchen which begin to blur past the initial demolition. According to Zulie, she is wont to pace the sunbaked marble and mutter threats to the gourds and leghorns on the backsplash, touch a single finger to the wrought-iron pendants over the island and frown at the residue it leaves, or attempt to wiggle loose the aged brickwork around the double range. But she can never bring herself to tear it all down. She doesn't know how to replace it. We secretly hope she never will.

Zulie hates identifying as rich. We're comfortable, she once told Anais, a few years back when Anais was bitter Zulie had gone to Turks and Caicos for spring break and all Anais did was watch Cheers reruns with her father and crack him a new Heineken every twenty minutes. Why do rich people always say that? Anais asked her, earnestly. "Comfortable." Me and my dad are "comfortable" too. We have a roof over our heads and beds of our own and food in the fridge. But I don't have a fifty-dollar setting spray and every other summer we go to Saugatuck with my cousin Frankie and that's it. Does that make me "uncomfortable?" Zulie still feels ashamed to this day, particularly when her family's biggest concerns are whether they'll have to cancel their summer in Málaga while corporate offices are laying off employees like Anais's father by the dozens. But Anais can't complain, not since the C-M house has become something of a second home to her, Mrs. C-M like a proxy mother who, as far as either of us can tell, adores Anais more than either of her own biological daughters. At the C-M house, Anais has her own bath and hair towels, her own electric toothbrush, her own seat at the dinner table, her own set of sheets
still in the store-packaged cube on the top shelf of the linen closet, in case she ever decides to move into the guest bedroom. Last Christmas, she had her own stocking, right in the middle so they all spelled GRATZ along the mantle. Neither of us would be shocked to discover her name among the beneficiaries in Mr. and Mrs. C-M's wills.

Our last day of high school, we park in the driveway as usual, behind the aborted remains of Mr. C-M's old Barracuda, which he's been trying to fix since Zulie was in pull-ups. Mrs. C-M is out on the vaulted porch waving us in, a bottle of Clorox wipes beneath her arm. We scrape our soles on the mat and enter like guests.

Is this new? she asks, holding the hem of Anais's UT Rockets pullover, cut bluntly right at the midriff. Her fingers are damp with disinfectant fluid. Where do you buy something like this?

Zulie grins. Guad doesn't approve?

Mrs. C-M whacks her on the shoulder and starts cussing at her in Spanish. Qué va, Zulema, who do you think you're talking to? La babiecada que me viene de esa boca tuya, yo no lo pillo. You do not call me Guad.

I found this at Saver's a long time ago, Anais says, but I cropped it myself.

Jesus, Zulie says, I forgot about Saver's.

It looks lovely, Annie, Mrs. C-M says, beaming. And I do approve. Zulie makes fun of me because she doesn't like me. Before Zulie can defend herself, Mrs. C-M turns to her and asks, Zulie, princess, could you do your mother a favor and text your sister and ask her when she'll be home? She's ignoring my calls.

Reve has soccer on Thursdays.

There is no soccer. There is a virus. Use your head, Zulema. Anais laughs at this, and
Mrs. C-M says at a grave pitch, She needs to be home immediately. Not at someone's house. Does she not know what's going on?

You let Anais over.

Anais is different.

Aw, Annie, you're *special*.

Oh, Mrs. C-M, Anais gushes, you're too kind.

If the C-M house is a second home to Anais, the Tuscan kitchen is our headquarters. Our command center. All official business—with the exception of highly confidential matters, which are settled in the privacy of Zulie's bedroom—is conducted here, late at night in the aslant glow of the range light. It is where we once sang the *Wicked* soundtrack beginning to end—Anais as Elphaba, Zulie as Glinda. It is where we once ate twelve grilled chicken skewers apiece and split half a box of butter rotini, and then took turns holding each other's hair back and voiding it all into Zulie's toilet the next morning. It is where, Thanksgiving two years ago, we split our first edible—a Chips Ahoy cookie that more closely resembled a fistful of gravel and glue—and, later that evening, where we practically scraped the finish off the good china to ensure nary a crumb of pumpkin pie was left behind. It is where Anais first asked Zulie to start calling her Anais, years and years ago, her outline trembling like a mirage, terrified sick Zulie would ask her to leave and lock the door behind her, that she wouldn't want to be friends with a boy who thought he was a girl; and it is where, two years later, Zulie helped Anais file a petition to change her name and gender marker. Are you scared? Zulie asked her then. Scared of what? Anais asked in return, though there were a thousand answers. She looked around Zulie's kitchen, this real-time relic of the past, like stepping into one of those dreams where she's little again and everything is extraordinary, aglow with novelty, and, most importantly, permanent, unmoored from the very
concept of change, from all that had to happen for things to exist in this particular way at this particular time, and from all that will happen to render those things part of the past. Was she scared of this? Of happiness only existing in retrospect, only evident when she looked backward and saw, at some point, she was happy, but she didn't know it then so she didn't cherish it and didn't commit its face to memory so she'd be able to recognize it when, someday, it returned to her? Was this the fear Zulie saw in her that day?

Do you think we can read each other's minds? Zulie asked Anais once. Neither of us remember when exactly this was or how old we were.

Yes, Anais said, but that metaphor doesn't sit well with me. It's not like that. I can't literally transcribe your thoughts.

You're so right, Zulie said. I think—you know when they say you can "see right through someone?" I think it's like that, like I understand how you think and sometimes that lets me know what you think, but you know, even morticians who carve open dead bodies can't tell just by the look of things who the person was.

Anais said, Do you think, when you first met me, you would've known I was a girl if you carved me open and looked hard enough?

Zulie said, I think there are different kinds of knowing someone and, at the time, I did not know how to say out loud, "Yes, my best friend is a girl," but on some level beyond whatever language our brains code in I knew the day I met you. And Anais knew what Zulie meant. We remember this now as the moment our friendship ended and our best-friendship began, though for lack of a clue as to when this moment occurred, it is as though the entire transformation were a long, smooth gradient between two shades of the same dazzling color, no demarcation of a before and an after. Just continuum.
A bit from this time: one refers to herself as the "voice of wisdom"—*I think, being the voice of wisdom here, I should be calling the shots*, something like that. The other retorts thusly: If you're the voice of wisdom, that voice belongs to a diner waitress in the deep South who walks around with a Virginia Slim in her mouth and calls you *sweethaught*. If you're the voice of wisdom, that voice belongs to the one alto in choir who thinks she's a mezzo and screepts the fuck out of anything over a B. If you're the voice of wisdom, may God save the olive trees. If you're the voice of wisdom, that voice is mute (she mimes zipping her lips shut). If you're the voice of wisdom, that voice belongs to an auctioneer who can't pronounce her *Rs*—"going fuh thuhty, going fuh fouhty." You hear that? That's you. If you're *The Voice* of wisdom, you won't see my chair spinning. If you're the voice of wisdom… (she clamps her hands over her ears). If you're the voice of wisdom, that voice belongs to the lady who narrates all those old commercials, the ones that would wake you up at one in the morning, sweating all over the living room couch, but this time she's narrating your fever dreams, and in that weird corporate tone, she's telling you how you're going to die.

* * *

In Zulie's room, through the twin windows, we watch the sun go down over the crooked oaks in the backyard. For a moment, the room fills with light, like a movie projector blinking alive from its perch in the theater box, and then, like a velvet curtain sweeping the sky, it becomes evening. Anais's portable speaker crackles with ruminative guitars and a woman's woodwind voice. She sings about failed love and the cosmos or something. This song reminds me of when I lived in Idaho, Zulie says as she reaches down beside her desk and sticks a plug in the wall. The weave of string lights above her bed comes on. What, when you were a fetus? Anais says. That doesn't
count. You were born here in Toledo. From the bookshelf on the other side of the room, Zulie's lava lamp, which is never off, makes its alien colors known in the newfound dimness. It counts for me, Zulie says. As she rights herself in her chair, she sees in her vanity mirror that the rhinestones she's applied at the corners of her eyes do, indeed, twinkle in the dark.

Does this look okay? she asks, turning the knob on her lamp, flooding the desk with light. I feel like rhinestones either look cute or make you look diseased.

No, girl, Anais says, they're *always* cute and they *always* give you pink-eye.

God damn it. I already glued them on.

Just own it. Disease is, like, *in* right now. Zulie gives Anais a weird look. I don't know. Libby Popović never shuts the fuck up about her ARFID, so I just assumed.

Libby Popović scares me. She's, like, a gremlin.

Anais examines herself in the floor-length mirror propped against Zulie's closet door. She tugs at the hem of her sweater, fusses with the monarch butterfly barrettes holding her hair back. I feel like we're overthinking this, she says. I mean, it's not like we're *never* going to see these people again. Honestly, I really think we're just going to go back in three weeks and everything will go back to normal. Everyone's making such a big deal out of nothing.

That's what *you* think, Zulie says, but who really knows?

Earlier today, we were invited to our friend Pram's house, a going-away party for the world as we know it. She sent the details in a group chat with us, a few people in our grade, and four phone numbers neither of us have saved to our contacts—kids from other schools, we hope, but Pram is kind of a wild card when it comes to that sort of thing. We didn't even ask Mrs. C-M for permission because, in the two days since the schools closed, she's gone full doomsday prepper, filling entire shelves in the unfinished part of the basement with canned beans, peaches,
and tuna; and this morning we discovered an entire Costco pallet's worth of toilet paper piled up against the sump pump—so the chances of her allowing us out of the house are less than zero.

But Pram promised beer, and maybe a Mario Kart tournament. And we are deft at sneaking out.

And anyway, Zulie continues, better to come overdressed than underdressed. If this is the last time we see these people, I'm not showing up looking like a wet rat.

You don't look like a wet rat. Anais comes over and kneels beside Zulie, staring into her eyes through the mirror. You look like a hot, sexy rat.

You suck, bitch.

Girl, hold up, do I smell like cat food? Be a hundred percent honest.

Zulie looks befuddled but sniffs anyway. No?

My self-tanner makes me smell like fucking cat food.

Now you're overthinking things. Zulie tugs on the skin beneath her eye and flicks a mascara wand along her bottom lashes. You smell like orchids and childhood.

What the fuck? This is not a safe space for poetry.

Anais, give me your pen right now, Zulie says without breaking concentration. I need to be baked within the next twenty minutes or I'm going to go full Girl, Interrupted.

Anais rises and digs through the tote bag splayed open on Zulie's unmade bed. Seconds later, she's gripping the rose gold torso of her weed pen like a caduceus. She clicks the button five times to turn it on, holds it down, sucks through the mouthpiece, inhales, and blows the smoke in a thin, barely visible stream right into Zulie's face. Zulie drops the mascara wand on the desk and swats her hands around, trying to disappear the smoke as though attacking a fly. She snatches the pen out of Anais's hand and takes a long hit. We pass it back and forth a few times. The cartridge on it is almost empty, the chartreuse oil pockmarked with air like a leveler, and
once it stops tasting like watermelon bubblegum and starts tasting like nickels and circuitry, Anais shoves the pen back in her bag.

We're walking to Pram's, right? Zulie asks, and Anais, already following her train of thought, says, Oh, yeah. What's the liquor cabinet situash?

Unobtanium, Zulie says. Tony and Guad finished the big Don Julio the other night.

Fuck. I was itching for a Sunny D tequila screwdriver. What else?

I think the only stuff left in there is wine and… vermouth, maybe?

What in the fresh hell is vermouth?

Girl, I don't even know. I tried it once. It tastes like blood. Oh! Zulie spins around, looking hopeful. Go check my closet. I might still have some of those High Noons.

Anais rushes over and throws open the shuttered closet doors. The fluorescent lights are an unwelcome disruption to the room's psychedelic atmosphere. Anais digs around in the mountain of clothing and comes up empty-handed. Shit, Zulie says. What's the plan?

We could always swing by my house. Daddy Larry has, like, a fuckton of liquor in his gun safe and, as far as I know, he doesn't know I even know the code.

What does Daddy Larry even drink these days? Heinekens?

No, not anymore, Anais says, and then, in a sheepish murmur, More like… malbec.

Malbec, and…?

And something called… Dewar's.

Anais, that is foul. I'm not drinking scotch.

It's better than nothing.

I'd sooner drink the vermouth.

Let's just load up on Pram's beers when we get there.
Oh, sure. Let's "load up" on beers that will be gone in a minute. Knowing Pram, her idea of "beer" is two twelve-packs of Dung Water Ultra. Or, maybe—and Zulie cannot, for the life of her, get through this sentence without laughing—should we be so lucky, we can split a room-temp White Claw between us and two other people, because why would Pram get enough of the good stuff? Why would we deserve nice things? Why, in these uncertain times, would we deserve something all to ourselves?

Zules, you are so—such a negative, um, Negative Nancy. Anais giggles, her voice frayed at the edges, and whispers, There's no way this shit is hitting that fast.

Girl, what the fuck are you talking about, Zulie says, I feel nothing.

Shhhhh, Anais hisses, still giggling, you'll wake Guad.

Oh, shit! We can't wake Guad!

We need to go. We need to go now.

And so we do. With all the lights still on, pillows bunched in human shapes under Zulie's comforter, and the speaker singing to no one, we shut the door, creep past Mr. and Mrs. C-M's bedroom, down the stairs and through the foyer. We tiptoe through the kitchen and wedge through the side door, careful not to open it too far lest it trigger the alarm. It's cold outside, far too cold for what we're wearing, but it's too late now to return for our jackets, so we keep walking, stumbling over each other's feet and regurgitating laughter down our chins like sweet, confetti vomit. We are sick with laffy taffy laughter at all sorts of nothing, the coils of tar in the road, the pronged beams of streetlight, the insufferable noisiness of the crows and cicadas howling the same verse back and forth like a lover's spit left on repeat, my mom and dad let me stay home, we scream at each other, no melody, it drives you crazy getting old. Pram's house is a ten-minute walk, but from where we are, above it all in the ether, it feels like walking the earth a
million times until we've ground it down to the size of a soccer ball between our feet. We laugh until it tastes like sugar, then salt, then resin; until our tongues are neon yellow, sour paint, the flavor of bliss. We laugh ourselves backwards through time, to childhood, to infancy, to embryosis, to the warm black pool where our souls were made, before there were bodies to fill, before the infuriating fact of our inherent apartness. We laugh and laugh and laugh, with such reckless abandon it comes back around and becomes precise, deliberate, as though our voices, thrown around in the blustery air, could collide at the exact right moment and, like some kind of divine chorale, become one singular sound.

* * *

Do you have a God complex? Zulie asks.

Hmm, Anais says. We're near the bleary end of a night drive. The sky is all black save for a wolf pelt of clouds around the moon, and a single studded star. I dabble, she finally says.

I'm begging you to elaborate.

Don't feel like it.

A swell of laughter.

Sometimes, Zulie says, I think I am God, and sometimes I think you are God.

Me fucking too, girl. Anais thinks for a moment. Can we both be God? Can we do that?

You know, some people believe in multiple gods. Hindus, Wiccans.

My neighbor's a Wiccan, Anais says. She doesn't even believe in multiple pairs of pants.

Zulie shrugs. She believes in us, apparently.

That's a stretch. She's got enough gods on her plate.

We could be her dessert. Or a midnight snack, for when her other gods aren't enough.

Anais gestures to everything. Are we not best enjoyed at night?
First, we go to the same college, and just like that—Okay, Carrie Bradshaw, Anais says, and Zulie frowns. Shut up and let me talk—we're a third of the way there. Our dorm (ideally in one of the nicer halls because roaches and mildew are absolute no-nos, we've heard enough horror stories, although we can make do with something a little less glamorous if we can convince ourselves it's part of the plot—The plot? Zulie asks. The plot, yes, Anais says, which I would love to explain if you'd stop interrupting me), anyway, our dorm will be a baroque nightmare, a Pandora's Box of everything we've ever owned and ever wanted to own, every thought we've ever shared transubstantiated into some tangible tchotchke. Our room will be clean and airy and smelling of lavender and white teddy bears because we are always welcoming guests, people who want so desperately to ensnare themselves in our web, to be a part of whatever glorious and innominable thing we have, but like a pair of redback spiders—Oh, you're really going to make that metaphor, I see. Mrs. Tran would be proud—we will lure them in, and just like that—Yes, I said it again, leave me the fuck alone—we will cannibalize them, harvest them for their nutrients—Not actually, right? Anais says, worriedly. I'm just not getting the metaphor here. Zulie rolls her eyes.

Then, once we age out of the dorm, we'll find an apartment near campus—I'm not living on Dorr Street, Zulie says. Okay, bitch, Anais says, then we won't live on Dorr Street. Zulie looks wounded. Not Secor either, she says meekly—and the rent will be too high and the rooms will be too small and no matter how hard we try it will always smell like the bottom of a bag of Cheerios, but it will be ours and we won't have to shake down our neighbors in the communal dorm kitchen for a Dutch oven and some goddamn olive oil every time we want to make food. Like the dorm, it will look like our friendship threw up all over the apartment. We will get used
to each other's invariable proximity, the feeling of being around each other as roommates and not just as a girl and her overstayed, highly appreciated, utterly adored, never resented, but nonetheless overstayed guest, who also happens to be her best friend. What we are trying to say is: it's unconscionable to have gone this long and become this close without ever really sharing a home. Don't get used to it, Anais says, because the second I have to wipe your loogies of toothpaste out of my sink, it's fucking over, we're fucking done. Zulie blows a raspberry at her. Even so, sharing every morning and every evening and every tender, undigested hour will simply not suffice, it just will not do. So we will get jobs together, someplace that pays enough for us to be irresponsible spendthrifts every once in a while—Because Zulie simply hasn't had enough experience with stupid money, Anais says. Zulie crosses her arms. The fuck do you get out of referring to me in the third person? I'm right here—but also doesn't overwork us to the point that we get vicious with each other—Can't we just work at a coffee shop for the rest of our lives? Zulie asks. Yeah, Anais says, and make not even enough to cover our rent. Use your head, Zulema. Her Guad impression is uncanny, refined over years.

After the apartment, the duplex. This is the part of the dream that gets a bit—How do we say this?—unobtanium—Thank you, Zules—the more we nurture it, winnowing itself down over time to its most practical form. The pink-and-green eyesore in California is an old dream, too on-the-nose—now we crave refinement, elegance. (And anyway, that duplex was besieged by flippers who repainted it all gray; now it looks like a boys' prison.) In every version, our duplex has two units affixed together along the middle with two shared porches, one on the front and one on the back. In the version we most cherish, it is a Georgian-style home with brownstone walls, ornate limestone friezes, and a topiary garden which we will pay someone else to dutifully maintain. There is an octagonal atrium between our units which will function as a parlor of sorts,
where we will have our daily coffee and exchange the million little ways our husbands have disappointed us since we last spoke, which in a perfect world will always be last night. We will frequent each other's units for the quickest of chats, the sparsest of moments, only to share the fleeting thought that has just occurred to us and we couldn't bear to keep to ourselves. And on the front porch, we will find a home for the couch we saw in Home Goods that one time, with the shelf built into the middle and the pink-and-green polka dot cushions; and beside each other on this couch we will watch the sun rotate around the earth every evening, feel the beads of condensation on our tequila screwdrivers gather on our fingers, and make a V with our other hand to spread open the pages of our crime novels—the kind of literature people seem to go rabid for once they reach a certain age. The age we'll be when our dreams will no longer be dreams, but very real possibilities. When we'll no longer feel like we're falling short of time, stuck behind its curve as it winds its way into the sky. Rather, Time will be just ahead of us, a seasoned marathoner, walking at his leisurely, unbreaking pace, and we will walk alongside him and inquire, "Time, Time, we come in two—how great our glee to have found you! Time, Time, whom we pursue—oh, tell us now, what wanteth you?" and Time will turn to us, a little startled, and say, "You don't have to speak to me like I'm some kind of bridge troll," and then he'll walk faster to get away from us—Anais, there's something seriously messed up with you, Zulie says, shaking her head. Who even thinks of something like that?—and the lesson to learn here is time is unknowable and unreasonable and kind of a heinous cunt—I'm taking your dreamscaping privileges away, Zulie says, wrenching the non-existent microphone from Anais's vicinity. You'll get them back when you stop trying to make a metaphor out of everything. Anais holds up an accusatory finger. Now, wait a fucking minute, you pulled that bullshit with the spiders earlier. We're even stevens now, Anais says. Zulie imitates her, We're even stevens now.
I can't wait to be old.

We're in Zulie's bed. Anais flips over to face her. How old are we talking?

I'm talking eighties, nineties. A hundred, even.

That's too old. I don't want to start forgetting things.

I mean, a hundred assuming we don't start forgetting things, Zulie says. That's kind of like dying, in a way. Forgetting things.

It's sometime between four and five in the morning, if we had to guess. Pram's party ended, without fanfare, three hours ago, but we're still awake, still talking. Each passing minute is more languid than the last, swollen with our competing desires to sleep and to keep going. The only light in the room is the lava lamp and its flameglo heart, our own private sun.

I want to be old women together, Zulie clarifies. I want to ditch our stupid fat husbands when it's nice outside so we can go limping around the park.

Can we wear old women's leisurewear while we limp?

The bed vibrates with Zulie's laughter. One day, old women's leisurewear will be, like, Juicy Couture to us.

Juicy Couture is already old women's leisurewear, so I'm not following your analogy.

Anais, girl, I really can't wait. Zulie's voice splinters a little. I just want one hot, sunny day where we're walking around and sharing one of those sun umbrellas and bitching and moaning about the heat and the sun and our joints, oh, our joints, and then I want us to get a pair of iced teas because we're just too damn old for coffee, it's too damn much for our old hearts. And I want to look back at all our years together and remember everything perfectly, just in case it really is the end of the world as we know it and nothing is funny ever again. I want to laugh
with you until it hurts for the rest of my life. I don't know why I'm crying. Anais instinctively reaches out and gathers Zulie's tears on her thumb. I used to think I was afraid of getting old.

*I'm afraid of getting old, Zules, Anais says. I don't get how you're not.*

I used to be. But I think what I'm really afraid of is nothing turning out how I imagined it. Like, I know it's sort of stupid and irresponsible, but we keep talking about the duplex and, to me, it's very real. Like, it's so real that if it doesn't come true I feel like I'll literally die, like it would be like going back in time and preventing myself from being born. I don't know. I keep having these nightmares where I'm an old woman on my deathbed and my life has been perfect and full and beautiful, but you're not in it. For some reason, you're simply not in my life anymore. And we never got the apartment, much less the duplex, and maybe you never existed at all. And it's supposed to be a happy dream because, despite this, everything turned out okay in the end and I have no regrets about anything, but then the moment I start to die, I'm watching myself from above and I'm trying to stop it, and I'm calling out, *Wait, stop, this isn't right.*

*Where's Anais? Where is she? She's not here. She's not here.*

The lava lamp stirs in silence, its globules now a bright cerulean. Anais watches the dots revolve in the reflection of Zulie's eyes like the three blue planets Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. We are certain if, at this very moment, the globules were to turn pink and green—the two colors they have never been at once—well, that would be all the cosmic reassurance we need that nothing will ever come between us. But the lava lamp remains blue and only blue, like it was always going to be. Oh, well. Let's be hopeful anyway.

* * *

When everyone thinks the world is ending, we know better. Okay: the world is ending, as it has innumerable times before, as it did the moment we were born and as it will the moment we die.
This is fine. Such is the privilege of being omniscient: we know the world will end googols upon googols of times, and still, even then, we will be far, far away—farther away than we can ever imagine—from the moment we run out of time. Time, the thing that will pass whether we want it to or not. Time, the thing we chase like four pink-and-green ribbons unspooling out of our hands and into the years: one from now, the dorm room; two from now, the world, still there, at our fingertips; three from now, the apartment, jobs at a coffee kiosk where our co-presence is like terrorism upon our superiors, Thanksgiving with the Mulders and Christmas with the Canseco Mejias; four from now, long weekends on the Eastern Shore, too many tequila screwdrivers at weddings where we know no one, perhaps not even the groom; decades from now, seven duplexes in seven cities from coast to coast, neither of us ever separated by more than a single wall through which one can still hear, if she listens close enough, the rise and fall of the other's breath, and feel in her bones whatever the analogous emotion is to seeing any star in the sky besides the one that never seems to go away, or to hearing for the first time on an ultrasound monitor the beautiful, desperate gunning of a second heartbeat.
The smell of the beach gives me migraines and Josie nausea, yet here we are, slouched over our table, trying not to vomit in the sand at the sight of our father and The Girlfriend emerging, arm in arm, from the restaurant doors.

"Cora, look. It's The Fiancée," Josie says under her breath. She dislodges the splinter of teak she's been picking at since our first pair of drinks. I wonder if I've accidentally said something out loud. "Thar she blows, Mrs. Wife-to-Be."

"Stepmother-to-Be," I say.

"Stop, don’t make me throw up."

Josie takes a sip of her watermelon vodka crush, leaning all the way forward so she's cantilevered on the edge of her chair with her hands clasped in a mega-fist between her shins. The wind off the Assawoman Bay is beginning to gather, the palmettos up on the landing fanning their leaves like flamenco dancers, the neat line of Adirondack chairs down on the beach rearranging themselves into a scatterplot. Our table's umbrella curls and flickers at the edges, keeling to one side so we must crane our heads to see the pool, and the labyrinth of Sunset Island condos just past it. Steel drum and bongo instrumentals croon on the speakers. It's a blue June evening.
"The Fiancée' just doesn't have the same ring to it, though," she adds. *Pun intended?* I wonder. "I feel like we should just stick with 'The Girlfriend' for right now."

"Or we could wait until she's 'The Wife.'"

"Well, once they're actually married, they're 'Mr. and Mrs. Bigamy.'"

"She’s not a bigamist, though. Technically speaking, at least." I stir my mojito, pinching the straw between my cracked acrylics. "At worst, she's a bigamist lover."

"No, that's not what I mean. It's like—" Josie makes a puckered expression I mistake, briefly, for crying, though when it disappears I assume it's just the wind in her eyes. "It's like, they get married, right? So The Girlfriend marries Mr. Bigamy, and thus she becomes Mrs. Bigamy. It's her married name."

"Does that make her full, married name 'The Wife Bigamy'?"

"I'm not calling her 'The Wife,'" she says through a laugh, as though I've suggested the most ridiculous thing.

"Okay. Are we going to unpack that, or… ?"

"I don't know, Cora. I just don't like it."

Our father and The Fiancée are now descending the stairs onto the landing—a large, peninsular sandbox over the bay, which acts, during the summer, as the restaurant's outdoor dining space; and which the prodigal soon-to-be-weds have reserved this evening for an unimaginable sum of money. Josie and I ogle as they make their pre-appetizer rounds. They start with the table of fourteen by the stairs, occupied by the most Ocean City-looking people I've ever seen: seven women in their fifties, all bones and burnt copper; and their beer-bellied husbands, who have chosen, curiously, to attend this presumably formal dinner in swim trunks and Under Armour compression shirts, like toddlers at the beach. Immediately I can tell they're friends of
The Fiancée, though our father and the husbands greet each other like they're brothers, bear hugs and back slaps and *How the heck are ya?!* and *Hey man, congratufuckinations*. They linger there for another five minutes and proceed to the adjacent four-top.

"How long do you think they'll take to get to us?" Josie asks.

I pretend to think about it. "Three hours."

"Great." She stumbles to her feet, her sandals sinking into the sand. "I need to pee. If the shrimp comes and you eat it all, I'll kill you."

"Oh, but Josie, what if I'm hungry? What if I'm just terribly famished? What if I *starve?*"

"I will *kill* you," she says again, not quietly, before heading up the stairs toward the restaurant, leaving me alone at our table.

I lean over my mojito, wag my tongue around the straw, inhale the colorless dregs, and nudge the empty plastic cup into the cluster of its depleted siblings. Josie's watermelon crush is sweating in a little puddle inches from my hand, barely touched. It's only her second drink, but her eyes have already begun to get that distant look, blinking one after the other, her cheeks in full bloom. I'm sure I'd be doing her a favor by cutting her off for the night. At least then, she'll be spared the embarrassing cliché of getting sloppy drunk at our father's engagement dinner. I slip my left hand through the slit in my dress—a last-minute maxi situation from the Ross clearance rack—to pick at a scab on my thigh. My finger comes back dry and red under the nail. With my free hand, I gather the empty cups and stack them by the umbrella pole. There are still a few lime wedges left, so I pop one in my mouth and suck the rum out of it. When the server comes by with the coconut shrimp, I slide her the stack of cups, and she takes them without a word.
By the time Josie returns from the bathroom, our father and The Fiancée have reached the far corner of the landing, where the Maryland flag bucks gallantly against the sky. He's holding about ten envelopes, all different shades of pastel, and is passing them from hand to hand as The Fiancée chats with two girls my age. They're both wearing different shades of the same sundress—peach and matcha—and nursing a pair of tequila screwdrivers. Before our father advances to the next table, the girl in peach gives him another envelope: antique gray with a gold trim.

Josie falls back into her chair, wringing a brown paper towel between her knuckles. "Did you miss me?"

"Dearly. Did you get Dad a card?"

"Yeah, it's in my bag." She gives me a wary look. "Did you?"

"Of course I did," I say, feigning offense.

"Good. I may need your help, actually." She reaches into her bag—a Vera Bradley crossbody with Barbie-pink mandalas, which she got for her thirteenth birthday and has kept this long for reasons that elude even me—and withdraws a pale yellow envelope and a piece of expensive-looking cardstock with a silver border. At the top, Josie's initials are embossed in large, curling gold script. "I still need to come up with what to write on it."

"Is this it?"

Josie tilts her head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, the card. This is what you got him?"

"Well... I'm going to write something on it, but otherwise, yes."

"What is this material? Oh, Jesus Christ, Josie, this feels like skin."

"It's Sugar Paper." I make a face, and she adds, "It's, like, fancy stationery."
"I thought we were getting gag cards."

"What in the world is a gag card?" I fold my hands in my lap, saying nothing. Josie stares at me. "Cora. Show me your card."

"Well, now I don't want to."

She slumps forward and holds her head in her hands, gripping her temples. "So let me get this straight: my card is completely blank, nothing on it, and your card is… something."

"It plays fart sounds when you open it."

"Dear God."

"I swear, it's really not that bad. You'll see, he's gonna love it."

"No, Cora, I won't see. You need to get rid of whatever garbage you got him, and you'll just… I don't know, you can just sign your name on mine or something. If you can manage that."

"Oh my God, why are you so butthurt over a stupid card? It's mine and I paid, like, five dollars for it, and… and what? Am I embarrassing you?"

"You're being immature."

"You're being immature," I repeat.

"You know what? I'm done." She sits upright and slides the stationery and envelope over to me, carefully avoiding the puddles of alcohol. "I've had it up to here, being the only person in this family who cares about anything, so here. You can figure it out."

"Me can figure it out?"

"You heard me. Write something nice and thoughtful and congratulatory, and make it genuine." She spears one of the shrimp with her fork and drags it through the chili sauce. "And no poop jokes or cuss words."

"Hmm," I murmur, as though that were a dealbreaker. "Whatever. Fine. I'll try."
Josie sticks the whole shrimp in her mouth and reaches for her watermelon crush, chewing through an infuriating smirk. When she brings the cup to her lips, a single pink ice cube tumbles out. She raises her eyebrows, and I give her a sheepish smile.

* * *

My father and The Fiancée are avoiding us. After greeting and chatting with the table nearest ours, the last on the periphery of the landing, they proceed to the interior tables, edging us out of the rotation. At first I'm relieved—I haven't yet figured out what to write on the card—but when I look over, Josie's face is bright red.

"He's avoiding us," she says, conclusively. "Look at him. His own daughters. Avoiding us."

"I was about to say."

"Of course he is. Why wouldn't he? This is textbook Dad behavior."

"Maybe he didn't expect us to come."

"Oh, we were absolutely expected to come. I mean, think about what he'd do if you bailed on his engagement dinner of all things. Or, Jesus, if I bailed. I can't even imagine. It'd be like… Easter, times a million."

I bristle at the reminder of Easter, but Josie pushes on.

"No, this… it's, it's, it's all part of his plan. First, he gets us to show up, oh, look, it's his daughters, driving from all the way out in Salisbury to show up for their dad, how precious, how mature, how supportive, good dad, good dad, and then…" She pauses for dramatic effect—could she pause for any other effect?—and then finishes, "He shoves us in the corner. Literally, shoves us in the corner of the restaurant. So we can sit pretty and smile and save face, and all the sycophants just gobble it up."
"I chose this table," I mutter.

"And I can't even blame him, because what am I going to do?" Josie slumps back in her chair, staring off into the horizon.

"Did you want to move, or…?"

"Can I say something serious?" she asks, rhetorically. "Just for a second, I want to be serious. I know you and Dad have your little thing with each other, so you probably don't get it. You can just bite back and walk off with a buzz or whatever, but… I don't know. I feel so neutered with him. I feel like he knows he can kick me and kick me and keep kicking, and I'll just lay there and take it like a champ, and never fight back or say anything. And I just have to know: don't you ever feel that way? Or is this all just a game to you?" She turns back to me with a strange look on her face—fascination, almost, maybe even envy.

I narrow my eyes. "What's that look supposed to mean?"

"What look?"

"That look you're looking at me."

"Girl, fuck you."

"Hel-looooo!" a voice whistles into the back of my neck. I swivel around so fast I almost backhand the moles off my Aunt Elise's face. The sudden scent of garlic and cat deodorizer should've given her away.

"Hi, Aunt Elise," Josie says through an exhausted breath.

Aunt Elise is our father's older sister. For the occasion, she's wearing gold-rimmed sunglasses and an enormous wicker hat whose shadow eclipses half the table. Her mouth is extremely wide, almost inhumanly so, lined with black cherry lipstick and full of gleaming orca teeth. She crouches down between our chairs and puts her hands on our shoulders. They're oddly
smooth and also freezing cold—not unlike what I imagine an orca's would feel like—with a distinct sheen on each finger, like she's spent the first half hour of dinner lathering them with canola oil.

"Josie. Cora." She jostles our shoulders. I shiver. "I've missed you both."

"We've missed you, too," we mumble.

"How long has it been?"

"Uh, I'm not sure," Josie says. "I think since our mom, um…"

"Ah. Since your mom. That makes sense. I haven't heard from her since… well… yes, it would've been your graduation, Cora, when I last… spoke with her." Aunt Elise stands and pulls out one of the two unoccupied chairs at our table. The wind bites at her dress: silk chiffon and completely shapeless, like a shower liner rung across the thin margin of her scapula. "She seemed like she was getting better then, though… well, now I'm not sure. Is she still up in Dover? I do miss her. I wish she'd call."

"Yeah, well," I say, "so do we."

"Josie, talk to me," she continues, ignoring me. "What are you doing now with that fancy master's of yours?"

"I'm an addiction counselor," Josie says.

"Oh, how fun!" Aunt Elise's face brightens.

Josie makes the same puckered expression from earlier, which I now recognize as a sort of pained, perfunctory smile, like when the doctor's asking where you’re from originally while feeling you up for breast lumps. I try to pass a knowing look at her, but she doesn't reciprocate.

Aunt Elise continues, "I knew a kid, a friend of your cousin Chuck's, who went to work at an outpatient center after graduating from, uh… Towson, I think, and he told me all about it, the
things you see. People who break their own legs just to get some Dilaudid. Moms who drink too much wine one time and drive their cars into ditches. People who... who shoot up so much they have both their arms amputated, and they sit there, just... screaming for their veins back. Horrible, horrible stuff. You're a hero, I hope you know."

Josie nods, her smile thinning.

Aunt Elise goes on and on, waving her freezing orca hands all about, while pivoting gradually in her chair until it's no longer discreet she's only interested in Josie. I attempt to butt in every so often, to no avail. When she brings up a game we used to play with our cousin Chuck, I make a joke, but she pretends not to hear me. Josie offers me the occasional sympathetic glance, but it's hard for her to mask her self-satisfaction. I know how much she enjoys the attention, and the ease with which Aunt Elise gives it to her while withholding it from me. Josie’s always been the one the adults like better, anyway. She went to college; I didn't. She has a big girl job; I don't. It's not personal. It's just the way it is.

I decide, once Aunt Elise's monologuing reaches its fifth minute, I'm ready for another drink. I wave our server over.

"Hi! Sorry to bother you." I tap the rim of my cup. "Could I get another, um, mojito, but this time, could you have them do, like, a generous pour? And I mean generous, like, don't just put some Bacardí in the straw, I'll be able to tell, ha ha! I mean, I'd like you to—"

"I'm sorry, I don't think I can do that for you."

"Oh, that's totally fine, then. I'll pay for a double, but—"

"No, I mean, I can't serve you any more drinks."

I blink. "You're cutting me off?"

"I'm really sorry. It's state law. I cannot serve alcoholic beverages to the... um... if you're,
uh, visibly impaired." She seems genuinely apologetic, too, which makes it even worse. "Can I get you something else to drink, Coke, iced tea, coffee? Water?"

"No, I'm fine," I lie. "I'm a server too, so I get it. Um. Actually, can I get a ginger ale?"

"Yeah, absolutely, I'll be right back."

As she leaves, I glance at Josie’s new watermelon crush, a replacement for the one I drank. My eyes thrum in their sockets. Visibly impaired, she said. I'm visibly impaired. How much have I had? I try to remember how many empty cups there were, but my mind immediately wanders. I think of the women I see at my job—the moms in their thirties who flock with the after-church crowd, denim jackets and cork wedges; the ones who camp at the high-tops beneath the skylight or out under the pergola, order avocado skillets and bottomless mimosas, drink until they're flushed and vertiginous, and drive themselves home in their Expeditions and Range Rovers. They used to remind me so much of my own mother, but I try not to think of it that way anymore.

I look at the server, now at another table, gathering baskets of tartar-smeared newspaper onto a tray. The back of her head is a judgmental shape—a blonde bun clenched around dark streaks of outgrowth, a short neck mottled with freckles—and I mouth swear words at the shape until Aunt Elise is gone and Josie is swatting my forearm. "Cora. Cora. Cora."

* * *

The Fiancée, in her spare time, teaches at a yoga studio just outside Ocean Pines. The Fiancée's mother's side of the family are all Delmarva natives, but her father's side is from Michigan's Upper Peninsula—or the "Yoop," as she sometimes calls it, nostalgically. The Fiancée's natural hair color is a deep caramel, almost ginger, but you can't really tell because she got a balayage in anticipation of the engagement dinner. The Fiancée went to a private school in Salisbury and her
graduating class was only twenty-five students. The Fiancée turned thirty-three last October, making her nine years Josie's senior and eleven years mine. The Fiancée is a paralegal for a divorce lawyer (I'm not sure yet if this is how she and my father met). The Fiancée used to work at a crab shack in West Ocean City with parking for both cars and boats, though she was a hostess, not a server. She quit after a drunk guest tried to push her over the railing into the harbor. The Fiancée has the gene that makes cilantro taste like soap, and is allergic to kumquat. The Fiancée has a cat named Ruthie. The Fiancée was named after her mother's favorite constellation.

* * *

I've been pacing inside and around the restaurant, in search of a toilet for so long I'm starting to think they expect us to just squat and pee straight off the side of the dock, when I turn around at the veranda and Josie appears from nowhere.

"Fuck! Jesus!" I screech, my heart pounding. "What are you— are you following me?"

"Oh, get over yourself, you gnome. I just need to know if you've written the card yet."

"What do you think? I haven't even left our table since you gave it to me."

"Well!" she scoffs, and then just stands there, picking her arms up and letting them slap against her sides, like she's waiting for me to change my mind.

"Well, what?"

"Are you going to write it?"

I make a coy gesture with my hands and giggle. "Maybe…!"

"Uh uh. Stop being funny with me. I don't want you to come back to our table without that card written." I open my mouth but she keeps going. "Please, Cora. I just need you to do this one thing. Please just… don't make a scene, don't be stupid, I… I just really want this to be an easy night, no drama. So could you please, please, just not screw this up for me?"
"Oh my GOD, stop talking. You're worse than Mom."

"Pot to kettle," she says.

"You got Dad's tits, though, so... suck on that." I turn to leave, but she follows.

"You know he's going to blame me, right? He'll blame me for all of it."

I spin back around, stumbling a lot. "I said I'll do it, damn!"

She purses her lips. "And you need to fix your makeup. You look haggard."

"You look Hagrid," I slur. Josie smiles wanly and heads back toward the landing.

I open my purse and withdraw the skin-textured cardstock, holding it against my sternum as I walk, as if to will an inscription directly from the heart. This doesn't work. At some point, the walking trail splits off into Beach Side Drive. A long procession of expensive cars hugs the sidewalk, Tahoes and Wranglers and Armadas with sand crusted on the tires. I find the bathrooms by the pool gates, in a turquoise building at the end of a portico where wet children sit gnashing on grapes. I pee, wash my hands, and scrape loose flakes of my concealer into the sink. My eyes are bloodshot, and there’s a pale spot in the center of my mouth where my lipstick has faded: reminders of how much I’ve been drinking, and of how soon my night will capsize.

Outside the bathroom, I pass the card from hand to hand, deliberating. I know what Josie would write—something lovely, I'm sure, and seasoned tastefully with ego-stroking bullshittery—but for the life of me I cannot conjure her words. I twirl the pen between my fingers, watching the twilight drag across the portico.

*   *   *

I had just come home from the worst double of my life and collapsed onto my couch, still in my dirty non-slips and concert black, when Josie called: Dad had proposed to The Girlfriend on Mother's Day.
"Oh, Jesus Christ," I said.

"I cannot believe that motherfucker." There were muffled, domestic noises coming from Josie's end of the call. She doesn't have children of her own yet—she wants to wait until thirty, the age our parents had her—but that weekend she was in Hebron babysitting her boyfriend's twins while he was at a conference in Baltimore. I'd only met Josie's boyfriend once, at Christmas, and all I remembered was he knew an indecent amount of Star Trek trivia and was the same age as The Fiancée, a fact I'm sure Josie loves to ignore. "Not even divorced yet. That's the kicker, right? The man is still fully, legally married, yet apparently he's gonna sh—Brody, put that back where you found it. Now, Mister Man—that fucker's gonna shack up with Skanky McSkankerson, the finest skank this side of the Chesapeake."

"Dear God, Josie. What did she ever—?"

"She fucked our dad, Cora!" One of the boys started shrieking, in the even tone of a child who likes to hear himself make noise. "Sorry if that's harsh, but I'm just calling it how I see it. Fucking a married man? Marrying a married man? That is a bona fide skank."

"Still."

"Why are you defending her?"

"I'm not defending her!" I said, realizing, at the same time, I was. "I'm just saying, I don't think she's some horrible supervillain. If anyone is the skank here, it's Dad."

"Dad is a skank."

"Well, there you go."

Josie paused a moment—even the boys seemed to hold their breaths—and said, "He also mentioned a dinner or something, by the way, so just... look out for that. I'll talk to you tomorrow." Before I could say goodbye, she yelled, "Brody, get your fucking hands off—!" and
then nothing.

That evening, I put on my last clean pair of sweatpants and drove to the Olive Garden in downtown Salisbury, where I'd become something of a regular. At first, it was only Sunday nights. I'd come in after my usual double, sit at the bar, have a spritzer or two, and leave within the hour: a small, dependable luxury. But then it became Thursday nights, too; then add a stressful Monday here and there; then a coworker's having a birthday party here on a Friday, and Josie wants to start doing weekly Wednesday dinners. And this was before I started spending all my spare moments at work getting high by the dumpsters with the prep cooks and busboys.

And there I was again. Though it was past nine, the lobby was bedlam—crabby, overdressed families stamping their feet, a triumvirate of anxious hostesses calling names with mounting frustration. I caught a look of gratitude from one of them as I passed the podium on the way to the bar. It was the same bartender from Saturday night—she'd made me a French 75 that put me squarely on my ass—and I was trying not to make too much eye contact in case she recognized me, which she obviously would, and what if she said something, or refused to serve me, or unzipped her skinsuit from the crown of her head, down her torso, to reveal she was actually my mother all along? "Drinking alone on Mother's Day?" she might've said, kissing her teeth. "Seems a little on-the-nose, doesn't it?"

At the bar, I bought a bottle of Roscato, alleging I had friends coming. The bartender, totally buying this, brought me the bottle in an ice bucket, and only one glass. I also ordered a bowl of minestrone. As I waited, I couldn't help but think of Easter. The memory was a month old, but it still stung like it'd happened that day. In my defense, I'd had a particularly difficult winter, and spring wasn't looking so promising either. My studio apartment had become a catacomb, the air frothy with mildew, a trail of crumbs and socks tracking my path from the door
to the unclothved mattress on the floor, which I'd stained with Captain Morgan and a thin layer of weed dust. Since Christmas, I'd watched *Gilmore Girls* all the way through seventeen times. My father texted me Easter morning, asking if I would be coming home for dinner, with a heads-up that *Cassie will be here*. I imagined, unfairly, she'd be sitting at Mom's spot at the table too, eating green beans off the good china, all very pleased with herself. I replied yes, though it was a lie and I knew it. But it wasn't so much that I wanted to be cruel or despicable, as was later presumed, but that I was bored, and thought it might be fun to toy with my father, watch him squirm. I'll admit I went a bit far. At first, I texted him, *10min away; and, turning onto windjammer now*. Meanwhile, I was actually on my couch, picking the acne scars on my forehead and nursing a bag of shredded cheese. I had to work the next morning anyway. He had good liquor. It was probably for the best. But then, still unsatisfied, I waited twenty minutes and texted, *dad i didnt mean to but i got pulled over and ive been drinking and i need you to come get me please bring bail money if u can. i really didnt mean to. im so sorry.*

Sometime after midnight, I called Josie. I was crying before she picked up. "Cora," she said, softly. "I fuck everything up," I whimpered. "No, you don't. But this… this is… I just don't know how you could do something like that to him." I dropped my phone on the bed and made an extraordinary gasping sound, like the first breath after nearly drowning. I pictured my father on the porch, a sagging silhouette against the sunset, waiting for my blue Camaro to turn the corner. I pictured him racing down Worcester Highway to the police station in Berlin, sweating through his nice Easter polo, for he knew the way by heart. I tried to picture what he would've looked like when he realized I wasn't there, but I couldn't get his face right. I hung up on Josie. She didn't call back. Easter was over.

A month had passed and nothing had changed. I was still the same fuck-up, drinking
alone at Olive Garden on Mother's Day, unable to get over what I'd done. I stirred my minestrone and slowly drained the Roscato as the sequence of Easter night replayed in my head over and over again. I paid, drove home, and crawled into bed, but the memory continued to loop even as I shut my eyes and wrapped my arms around my shins and rocked in place like a child trying to cradle herself to sleep.

* * *

I stop thinking, remembering myself, and scrawl something on the card. My handwriting is mostly illegible, making the whole thing look like kids' graffiti. Good enough. I stand, turn left at the egress, and run straight into my father.

"Jesus, Cora, you came out of nowhere," he says, his voice mellow and gravelly. Whiskey-buzzed. "Where have you been?"

"I was peeing."

"Oh, Christ, that's… I didn't need… all right. Josie and I have been looking for you."

"Really? I just saw Josie."

"She said you've been gone for forty-five minutes."

"Oh, shit. Okay. Well." I shrug dismissively, at which point I realize I'm still holding the card. I quickly shove it in my purse, and when my father doesn't say anything, I issue a short, breathy laugh. "I just need the, um, envelope from Josie, and then it's all yours."

"The card, you mean?"

"Yes, the card."

"Card, singular?"

I grin without my eyes. "It's a joint effort."

"Ah, I see." He pushes himself forward onto the tips of his toes and falls back down
again, his hands slipping into his khaki pockets. I can tell from the way he tightens his lips he wants to push further on the subject of the card, singular, but instead he says, "Thank you for being here, by the way. We don't get to see each other much anymore."

"We, uh... we don't see each other at all."

He grimaces. "Well, sure, we don't see each other at all. But that's going to change. Once Cassie and I are married, I want you and I to work on our relationship." He gestures to the space between us. "She is a wonderful woman, Cora, and I think you should get to know her better. And Josie, too. I want us all to be a family again."

"You, me, and Josie, you mean."

"And Cassie."

"She isn't part of our family."

He narrows his eyes. "She will be."

"Yes, but by saying 'family again,' you imply—"

"Don't be a cunt, Cora."

"Don't fucking call me a cunt."

His mouth curves slightly, almost like a smile but not quite. "You know, as much as you don't like her, Cassie adores you. You act like we pretend you don't exist, but I've told her a lot about you, and she thinks you're hilarious. She can't wait to meet you." I think about how upset Josie was when they skipped our table, how eager The Fiancée seemed not to meet me. Then I think about her word choice, hilarious. "In case you thought you were some kind of pariah to us. In case you thought, somehow, that you were right to skip Easter."

"Are you really going to bring Easter into this?"

"Don't I reserve that right? You ruined a family holiday. You made your sister cry."
I did not know. "I mean, it's hard to be shocked at your actions anymore. I really just want to understand why. I thought you were just remorseless, or that greater than your capability for remorse is your indignation for me. But now I'm looking at you, and all I can think is—maybe you're just a fuck-up. I’d hate for that to be the truth, but you're relentless. You keep proving me right. I mean, look at yourself. You reek of booze, the tag's sticking out of your dress, there's pee on your foot, you don't have a real job, you're vicious to everyone who cares about you—"

"Dad," I interrupt. "I'm sorry. I apologize. There—you see, I'm not remorseless. I'm the least remorseless person on the planet. Just look at how sorry sorry sorry I am. I'm sorry for ruining Easter. I'm so sorry that I am a fuck-up. I'm sorry you raised a bad daughter. I guess that makes you a bad father. Oh, damn, I really shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry! Um. I'm sorry we had to go through everything we went through with Mom. That must have been hard on you."

He's staring at me now, entertained. I raise my voice. "I'm sorry you packed and shipped her up to Dover when things got tough. Wait, I guess you're sorry for that. I'm sorry for putting words in my mouth that I should've put in yours. And I'm especially sorry the market for women your age is such slim pickings, so you had to settle for a tart young enough to be your daughter. I'm sorry to all women and tarts and daughters, on behalf of my father."

He tries to intervene, "Enough, Cora."

"He's sorry, Your Honor, for committing bigamy, for you see, his other wife is in Dover but this wife is here, so you can see the pickle he's in, can't you?" I'm practically shrieking now. "Mr. Bigamy is sorry, everyone. He's a sorry, sorry, sorry old fuck."

My father steps forward so he's almost standing on my toes, his breath hot against my face. I can smell it clearly now—bourbon, Maker's, his staple. "I need you to keep your fucking voice down. You will not embarrass me in front of all these people"—Who can hear us? I think,
only now realizing how small the island is, how springly the bay winds carry my noise—"on the
night of my engagement party, for God's sake. When are you going to grow up, Cora? What is it
going to take? Does it not cross your mind that I have the right to happiness, too? Your mother…
does not want to be part of our lives anymore. And I am not a villain to move on." He steps back.
My face is damp with his spittle. "If it pleases you to know, this is the happiest I've ever been. I
expect you not to ruin it for me."

"Well, I expected a lot from you, too," I shout. It comes out shrill and babyish. "And, for
the record, I don't think you need my help ruining your marriages. It seems you're perfectly
capable of doing it all by your damn self."

He sighs. "You know, you've always been like this. Even your mother saw it in you. I
suppose it was endearing when you were twelve. I'd think, You got lucky with Josie. This is how
daughters really are." He doesn't even seem angry as he says, "But now, I'm starting to think,
maybe it wasn't hormones or puberty or angst or any of that. Maybe you're just a miserable cunt.
Through and through." Then he shrugs, Oh, well, and walks away.

I stand there awhile, speechless, watching him become a silhouette against the tiki
torches on the landing and their tiny, shivering flames.

* * *

Some nights, when I've drunk too much and my brain has turned to wool, I crawl into bed, shut
my eyes, but I don't fall asleep just yet. Instead, I find myself at the door of a bright room at the
top of the stairs. I slip inside, unseen. The blinds are rolled up, the windows dewy and blue. Josie
is reading on her unmade bed, her feet in the air, and I'm lying there beside her, doodling on her
homework. Her school uniform sits waiting on the dresser, ironed and pleated for our field trip to
Annapolis; but our pajamas are matching and we have an hour. The room seems to hold its
breath for us, the light softened just so; the calla lilies in the window box kneel at our altar. Josie flips over and shuts her book, grinning. "Cora, guess what, guess what. Harry names his son after Dumbledore." I cover my ears—I'm still on *Prisoner of Azkaban*. "Don't tell me how it ends! I don't want to know!" I am twelve years old. Josie turns fourteen next week. As the dew lifts, it becomes April. Dandelions are sprouting in the yard. Our father is kind. Our mother is just downstairs. Nothing bad happens to us. Has happened. Ever will.

*  *  *

Josie's not at our table when I return, nor is her bag. I scan the landing for our father, but he's off having a handsy conversation with one of The Fiancée's relatives, seemingly no longer worried about us making him look good. My skull is throbbing, a sharp redness behind my eyes. I dig around in my purse for my phone. It's now 9:18, and my only new notifications are two texts from Josie: *meet me at the pear*, and then a blurry photo of the pier in question.

I arrive ten minutes later, my sandals hanging from my wrist and my feet stubbled with sand. Josie is sitting at the end of the dock with her bag in her lap, dangling her legs over the water and watching the last slivers of sunshine disappear beneath the trees across the bay. We're far enough away from the restaurant that I can't hear the music or the children screaming by the pool anymore—only the cicadas, the waves lapping politely on the cordgrass, and the patter of joggers on the trail. I nudge Josie on the back. She motions for me to sit beside her.

"Hey, buddy," I say. "What're you doing all the way out here?"

Josie sighs. "I needed to get away. It was getting musty over there, all those people. This whole city smells like a dead whale. I thought I was going to blow chunks all over the table." She turns to me, grinning. "I am also, *como se dice*... uh, um... *monkeyed up*.

"God. You're *such* a lightweight. You had, what, like, three drinks?"
"Two and a half," she corrects, giving me the stink eye. "And then, like, a million more after you ditched me." A beat. "That bitch of a waitress had to cut me off."

"You know, she cut me off too."

She gasps. "Really?! Daisy Day-Drinky got cut off? Gah! Someone call the Pope!"

"Okay. All right, you're really monkeyed up, aren't you?"

She emits a long, wailing laugh that ends in a meaty hiccup. This suffices as an answer.

"Holy shit. Josie. Did you see Dad tearing me a new one by the bathrooms?"

She widens her eyes. "Oh, God. What did you say to him?"

"You would find a way to blame me for— sorry, that's not… okay, so basically, I kind of tore into him first, about Mom and The Fiancée and stuff. And he threw this big tantrum about it, and then he called me a 'miserable cunt' and stormed off."

"Oh," she says, and then again, softer this time, "Oh. I'm sorry, I just—"

"It's fine."

"No, it's not. I mean… that's so horrible. Like, horrible even for Dad." She takes a long, labored breath and cranes her head to watch a yacht pass, swinging her legs and kicking clumps of sand into the water. She doesn't seem shocked at any of this. She knows how he is.

After a minute of silence, I say, "I think I hate him."

"Mmm," Josie hums, smiling. "Yes, yes, good."

"Don't yes yes good me. This is not a yes yes good thing."

"No, this is very much a yes yes good thing. Trust me. I wish I actually hated him. It'd be so much easier, simpler, if I hated him. Instead, I…" She trails off.

"What?"

"I don't know. I just… I can't hate him yet. Not now, when he's, like… all happy and
whatnot." I make a face, but she continues. "I can't... you can't just hate your dad, like it's... I mean, I guess, imagine having to tell your younger self, like, 'Sorry, sweetheart, but your dad sucks, he sucks, and you're gonna hate him when you grow up.'" Her eyes gloss over. "I don't know. It's just... wrong. I can't do all that right now. I can't cross that bridge."

"It'll happen. If it makes you feel better, I didn't even have to... like, cross any bridges. It just happened. It'll happen for you, too. One day. Soon."

"Did you know Mom's back in rehab?"

I turn to face her. She doesn't meet my eyes, only continues to gaze out over the bay, as though trying to spot Dover from here, to see our mother waving in the distance.

"No, I didn't know that."

"She got a DUI down in Princess Anne. Wrapped her car around a guardrail. Nothing serious, she's fine, but they breathalyzed her and she blew, like, a point-two or something. So..." She jabs a blunt thumb northward. "Back to Dover she goes."

"Oh," I say, because it'd be useless to act surprised at this point. "I didn't know any of this. How did I not know any of this?"

"Dad just told me, while you were in the bathroom."

I don't say anything.

"Wait. Shit. Cora." Josie pushes herself up, ungracefully, and shoves her wet feet into her sandals. "We didn't give him the card."

"We're still giving him the card?"

"Well." She stands there on the pier, her arms flat against her sides. "I guess we don't have to anymore. Unless you've already written it."

"No, I have, but..." I reach into my purse. "I don't think we can give this to him."
She takes the card, squints, and reads aloud, "'Dearest Father. Your daughters Josie and Cora congratulate you on your engagement. May your…' What in the world? Cora, your handwriting is atrociou— Oh, '…union last many long, wonderful years. We wish only the very best for the future… Mr. and Mrs. Bigamy. P.S. Poop joke poop joke fuck fuck fuck.'"

"I mean, I told you I'd try."

Josie attempts to restrain herself—I can feel her trying, so hard, to be disappointed in me—but then a single, tiny giggle escapes, and suddenly she's doubled over, sobbing and laughing. "You're right," she says, holding her palm to her forehead. "We can't give this to him."

She's going hot pink in the face. "This is… no, we can never give this to him."

I lean back on my elbows, my eyelids growing heavy. From here, the landing is a blurry patch of light, all the guests pruned down to pale, oblong floaters. Our father and The Fiancée must be preparing to say their last goodbyes before they cut the music and blow the torches out. It occurs to me he is not waiting for us to come back; that when he goes home tonight to the house where his daughters grew up, he will climb the stairs to the second floor, and on his way to bed, when he passes that room, he will leave the door closed like always. Josie's bed, the window box, and the Harry Potter books on the shelf will all continue to collect dust, and we will never be a part of his life again, not the way we once were.
To this day, I am still unsure when exactly it was that I first met Gus Verikakis, what the sky looked like or how the sunlight fell on his house or which flowers were blooming in the planters beneath the bay window or anything like that. For a long time, I wasn't even sure if it was before or after my high school graduation that he and his dad moved to Bonners Ferry. However, I did recently realize it must have been before, because the night of commencement there was a freakish late-spring blizzard; and in the earliest memory I have of him, his hair, freshly trimmed, is full of flurries. He was leading me into his house, where the Canseco-Mejias used to live before they got pregnant and moved back to Ohio. There were still boxes in the living room, stacked to form a sort of skyline—he'd come to Idaho from New York, and I remember wondering if this arrangement was an attempt at curing homesickness. Then we dragged the garden hose through the sugar-dusted flower beds to his driveway and sprayed it down, watching the pale water run over the divots in the pavement where tufts of wheatgrass had stiffened in the cold. The idea was that the water would freeze overnight, and by morning we'd have ourselves a homemade ice rink. I'd steal his dad's hockey skates, and he'd wear his own; we'd use his lacrosse goals, and a tennis ball as a puck. We'd take the shitty weather and make something of it. This, I know, is not the true beginning. It's not even ideal—the next day, it shot back up to fifty degrees, slush weeping from the eaves, and our plan had melted away—but it's what I have.
It was the summer of 2001, and we were at the far edge of seventeen. My memories of this time come back to me in broad, smudged strokes: a supercut of images growing evermore grainy and unclear each time I revisit them. I realize this is, perhaps, for the better.

* * *

Mr. Verikakis had a new Silverado. New-ish—1999, if I recall correctly—but my mom had a station wagon that ran on hope and miracles, and the Canseco-Mejias had owned their Barracuda since the seventies, and every other car on the street had all rusted the same salmony color; so the first thing my brothers said when they met Gus was, "Show us the truck."

"It's in the shop," Gus lied. I'd seen it, well and polished, earlier that day.

"I call bullshit," Elliot, fourteen at the time, said. I flicked him hard on the base of his skull and he yelped like a little girl.

Toby, nine, started punching me in the midsection. "DON'T FLICK HIM." His punches were getting stronger, better aimed. It was becoming difficult to pretend they didn't actually hurt.

"YOU'RE BEING MEAN."

"If you don't stop hitting me, I'm going to tell Mom."

"No, please don't please don't please don't."

I looked at Gus, You see what I mean? and he laughed. I remember thinking, at this moment, he had a weirdly restrained laugh around my brothers, one he didn't have when we were alone, like he felt obligated to be the grown-up.

Elliot started whining like a dog. "Can we play street soccer now?"

"Okay. You two on one team, me and Gus on the other. Let's go."

"NO, THAT'S NOT FAIR," Toby screamed. "HE'S SUPPOSED TO BE ON MY TEAM."

He took the soccer ball out of Elliot's hands and threw it as hard as he could down the street. We
watched it bounce two or three times, roll over the lip of the hill, down to where the gravel spilled out into a tiny dirt clearing, and land in the briars along the creek. You could hear it pop and hiss from all the way up the road.

"Toby, you fucking retard," Elliot said, and I flicked him again. He turned on me, venomous. "I FUCKING HATE ALL OF YOU."

Toby started crying.

"Both of you go inside," I said. Gus looked bemused. "Go inside before I tell Mom everything you, Elliot, said, and that you, Toby, destroyed Elliot's ball."

Elliot's face went six shades of red, but he obliged and stomped away. Toby kept looking at Gus, snot burbling out of his nose, waiting for him to be the good cop and say never mind, we can play something else. I remember trying to discreetly extend my pinky and brush it against Gus's waist, to say, Don't kowtow to him. You're on my side.

"Go on, Toby," Gus said.

"I didn't destroy his ball on purpose."

"I know, bud."

I stepped forward and manually turned Toby around, gave him a little shove, and he limped back toward my house. I felt bad watching him go—he'd been chomping at the bit to play street soccer with Gus, probably because it meant he'd finally get a teammate. It was growing dim outside anyway, living room windows illuminating one by one down the street. Once Toby reached the yard, Gus leaned in and whispered in my ear to meet him in his garage at midnight—he had something to show me.

"Sounds gay."

"Might be." He smiled oddly, so I couldn't tell if he was joking or not. He jogged back to
his house on the other side of the street. I returned the odd smile to his shoulder blades, twin crescents flexing with each step.

That night, after everyone was asleep, I budged my window open and crawled through. Out of nerves, I'd overdressed: a flannel from the communal laundry basket, which I pressed smooth under a heavy bin of old art projects; and my good JNCOs, the ones without ketchup stains and crotch frays. I'd gotten down my brand-new sneakers from the top shelf of my closet, hidden where my brothers couldn't find and ruin them. I even wore my dad's Calvin Klein cologne, which I'd swiped long ago from the shoebox under my mom's bed where she kept all his things that still smelled like him, that she couldn’t yet (never would) let go of. I spritzed once on my neck, once on my wrists. *Just in case,* I'd thought, though in case of what? Of Gus and I driving forty-five minutes down to Sandpoint to cruise the mall? Which was closed anyway?

I waded through the overgrowth, wary of the rustling ferns that would've given me away, and ran across the street. The Verikakises' garage was a punished structure at the far corner of the property, flanked by a gang of emaciated Douglas firs. I slipped in through the side door. Gus was in the driver's seat of his dad's Silverado, high-alert red, the bed full of two-by-fours—"He can't build for shit," he said, when I later brought them up, "so he must be clubbing people with those." Without thinking or asking, I opened the passenger door and climbed into the seat. He didn't even say hello.

"You ever been to Canada?"

"No," I lied, startled by his urgency. "Well, I mean, just Kingsgate. The border's right there, so, technically, um... yeah, I have."

"You sure?" He laughed—his real laugh this time. "You don't seem so sure."

"Just turn the key."
Gus laughed once more and gunned the engine. The truck roared to life. In the rearview mirror, I watched smoke rush from the exhaust pipe up into the rafters; and for a long moment, I thought he was going to kill us both, that we were going suffocate together in his garage, but as soon as I'd made peace with it, he got out, yanked the door open, and let all the fumes melt out on the driveway. We crept in silence down our street, driving in complete darkness until we cleared the vicinity and he put the headlights on.

"That was slick," I said, still reeling.

"What was that?" Gus checked for oncomers on Main Street. "Oh, you mean—? Yeah, my dad's a real freak about his truck." Then, he imitated his father, "'Gus, you ever touch my truck unless I say you can, I take you to the cliff, tie you to the roof, and drop a rock on the gas pedal,'" in a thick, gnarled accent, which confused me because I'd met Mr. Verikakis and he had very little trace of one. "But he's also a heavy sleeper. If I start it in the garage, he won't wake up. I just have to be quick, 'cause... well." He looked at me gravely. "It's happened before."

"Oh," I murmured.

"I'm kidding."

"Ah." I was unsure whether to laugh.

"You got a dick up your ass or something?"

"What?"

"Never mind, could you just open this thing," he said, reaching for the compartment beneath the radio, "and there's a CD in a clear case, under the— okay, you got it, nice. Take it out. You know about Neutral Milk Hotel?"

"I've heard of it."

"Them. You've heard of them. They're a band and they— okay, so you don't know what
I'm talking about. Holy shit, your life is about to change. Put the disc in."

I opened the case and popped the CD—matte white, *SUMMER 2001* written neatly in Sharpie around the center. I carefully slid the disc into the player, afraid I'd snap it in half. I remember very clearly the sound of it whirring in there, of our breathing, and the brief but total quiet before the music began. The first song opened with a light, giddy guitar; then, a man's voice counting us in: "One, two, one two three four." Suddenly, an explosion of noise, drums and distorted synths and rapture horns. The lyrics, which elude me now, were difficult to follow. They seemed to tell of nostalgia, of childhood love, but also the Holocaust in some oblique way. I sensed there was context I was missing. Gus writhed along to the music, pitching his head forward and back, slamming his palms against the steering wheel. Partway through, he shouted, so loud and abrupt that I flinched, "JEFF FUCKING MANGUM!" He looked like he was undergoing an exorcism, and the Devil was winning. The entire song, I could only think, *This song is awful, this song is awful, this song is so fucking awful,* but then when it ended, I looked at Gus, who had been miming the trumpet in the outro, his face red with genuine effort, and I could only think, *That song was pretty good.*

We had been on Main Street for long enough it wasn't Main Street anymore, but Route 95. Everyone in Bonners Ferry, including myself, knew if you went north on Main Street long enough you'd eventually find yourself at the border; and I'm sure now Gus knew this too, and this was his plan the entire time. I guess I wasn't paying much attention to where we were going. It was dark out, and I was tired, and I couldn't figure out how to sit or where to put my hands, and I was in the car with this kid I barely knew though felt inexplicably attracted to, so much so I was doing everything I could to seem interested in Neutral Milk Hotel, which was proving to be an increasingly impossible feat—and, suddenly, we were passing road signs approximating
twenty miles to Canada.

"Wait, Gus, are you—? Where are you taking me?" I asked, though I knew the answer as soon as the question left my mouth.

He looked at me like I was as much a moron as I felt. "Canada. Like I've been talking about for, like, ten minutes. That and the Neutral Milk Hotel, but we're not going there." He laughed at his own joke.

"I don't have my passport. We can't cross the border if I don't have my passport."

"Chill, dude. We're not crossing the border. We're just meeting it. Cozying up to it. Scoping it out, one might say."

"Your dad's going to kill you. He's going to absolutely annihilate you if he finds out about this. Do you even have a driver's license? I didn't even know you could drive."

He made a grimacing smile. "You don't need a license to drive in Idaho."

"What?" I said, sharply, surprising myself. "Yes, you do."

"Yeah, okay. Or what? The town constable's gonna chase me down on his horse? He's gonna shoot at me with muskets and arrows? Get a grip."

I smiled. I couldn't help it. "We're not Wyomingites."

Gus rolled his eyes, and I could tell he wanted to blow me off and proceed with his plan, but at the next opportunity he swerved to the far edge of the shoulder and whipped the car in the other direction, back toward Bonners Ferry. I felt like an enormous asshole. He mumbled under his breath, "I'm no Idahoan either."

* * *

Shortly after our failed voyage to Canada, Gus came over while my brothers and I were washing the station wagon—Elliot had called our mom the b-word and, for some reason, we were all
being punished—and announced he'd finally unpacked his soccer ball so we could play street soccer, and Toby got so excited he nearly threw up right there on the driveway. For the rest of June, and part of July, we played nearly every day. Gus and I took great pleasure in brutalizing my brothers, forcing them to chase after the ball every time we punted it down the road or over the roof into our backyard. Eventually, defeated one too many times, they came before Gus and me, side-by-side as though presenting a brief, and declared street soccer "frickin' stupid" (Toby) and "baby shit" (Elliot), and went to play by themselves on the adjacent street. Gus tossed the ball back into his yard and motioned for me to follow him to the garage. I watched as he lifted the bottom of his shirt to mop the sweat off his face, revealing his thin, tanned lower back, the soft vertebrae, the burst of fine hairs at his waistband.

Unlike the night we drove up Route 95, when Gus's garage was dark and cold, today it was full of light, the halfway-set sun pressed up against the bottoms of the doors. The windows were spangled with fried insects and golden smears of dirt, and the sunshine poured through in thick, trembling bands. The Silverado was searing to the touch. Gus led me to a fold-out table on the back wall, where a massive, gilled computer crouched in the corner like a shark in a reef. Once the home screen loaded, he opened an application and began dragging files around the screen, clicking the mouse so loudly the sound echoed.

"What is this?" I asked, leaning in.

"LimeWire," he said, like I should've known. We did have a computer in my house, but my mom guarded it like the Pentagon. The last time I'd used one was when we'd had to stay at Best Western while our house was being treated for termites, and my brothers and I had snuck behind the front desk and looked up *naked ladies* on AltaVista. "I'm trying to burn a new summer mix," Gus continued. "My dad threw mine away, I'm pretty sure. I can't find it anywhere. And I
forgot he can see the fucking odometer, so he definitely knows I took his truck."

"And yet you live and breathe before me."

"Whatever. He hasn't said anything yet, so maybe I just lost it. You know, he might have to fly back to New York in August, so I'll get the truck for a whole week, and then we'll go much farther than just the border. Fuck, for a week, we could go all the way to the Yukon."

"You are obsessed with Canada, you know that?" I squinted at him. "Probably more obsessed than actual Canadians. It's all you ever talk about."

Gus shrugged. "I just think it's cool. Like, it really is right there."

"I guess it's not that cool when you live here."

He rolled his eyes and resumed his clicking. I leaned in even more, my chin hovering inches above his shoulder. He had named the file gus_01, and had populated it with a few songs I recognized—"Yesterday," "Karma Chameleon," "Take on Me"—and many others I didn't—"Army of Me," "Ants Marching," "King of Carrot Flowers Pt. 1," "Paper Bag," "Please, Please, Please Let Me Get What I Want," and four songs from Jagged Little Pill, none of which were "Hand in My Pocket." I wondered if this was what New Yorkers listened to, and if what I was observing was culture—something I felt I'd never experienced, not really. I'd have bet, in New York, Idaho was presumed a lawless territory, hillbillies running around in loincloths, hooting in pidgin tongues, sodomizing bears in the woods. I was never so ashamed of my hometown than when I was around Gus. He was one of those people whose opinions were so discerning, so assertive, you couldn't help but trust them. If he said Idahoans were bear fuckers, you dropped trou and did as prescribed.

"Some people still buy music, you know," he said as the CD burned in the drive, the green bar on the screen inching toward completion. I laughed like I knew what he meant. "I
watched my dad drop a hundred dollars on records at Sam Goody once. Not even rare ones, or, like, signed ones or nice pressings or anything like that. He got, like, *Abbey Road* for full market price. In the twenty-first century. Fucking jack-off."

"A hundred bucks on records is crazy," I said, insincerely.

"Yeah. He has this ancient phonograph, like literally straight out of *Looney Toons* with the big horn. And he never uses it, either. All that money, straight in the toilet." He paused, thinking he heard the CD eject, but it was nothing. "I sometimes think if he didn't buy *Abbey Road* that day, we wouldn't be living here. Like being twenty dollars richer would've kept us in New York. I know that's not true, by the way. But it's stuff like that that makes you think, *damn, if only*, you know?" I did not. "I'm serious about going to Canada, by the way," he continued.

"Like, deadly. You get it, right? Just to say you did it?"

"I get it, I guess." He looked hurt by this, so I followed with, "I mean, there's absolutely nothing up there. The closest city is Calgary, I think, and even that's, like, a five-hour drive. Otherwise, it's just mountains and a whole lot of nothing. Same as here." It still wasn't clicking for him, so I asked, "Do you think New York is the most interesting place on earth?"

"Yes," he said, "no question."

"So you never got sick of it?"

"Nope, never. That's the thing about New York—the charm and appeal never run dry. Every time I thought I'd seen it all, there was, like, a whole other neighborhood I'd never been to and it was a completely different world." I started to respond, but he cut me off. "I see the comparison you're going for. New York is nothing like Bonners Ferry. There's nothing interesting going on here. You people are, like, genetically adapted to having no fun because if you needed fun to live you'd all go extinct. This border thing is all you have, and it's all I have now. So
please just let me enjoy it."

I cocked my head. "Are you, like… telling me off right now?"

Gus rolled his eyes again, in that same playful way as before. I took this to mean, *Sorry for calling you evolutionarily boring*, but I knew he'd said it because he meant it, and he was only sorry he'd said it out loud.

"So are you coming with me or not?" he said after an appropriately remorseful pause. "I mean— I really want you to. I'm okay going alone if you're going to be a pussy about it, but I'd rather go with someone."

"Yeah, let's do it."

"Can we go tonight?" His eyes glowed with excitement. "Just to the border."

I issued a nervous little laugh. "Tonight? I can try."

"You're gonna have to do better than that."

Without even thinking, I said, "Fuck it. Why not?"

"Fuck yeah, baby! We're going to Canada!" he cheered, and the CD finally ejected. He grabbed a Sharpie from the ceramic pencil holder by the modem and wrote on the disc: *SUMMER 2001—ROAD TO CANADA*. As he snapped it into its case, he looked at me and repeated, "We're going to fuckin' Canada."

* * *

Years before, it was on the news: a forest fire near the border. National news, too; it was the most media attention I’d ever seen northern Idaho get. Footage from helicopters of police barricades on Route 95, and behind them, flames licking the skin off the mountains, the sky distended like a sack of smoke. Now, there was enough moonlight to make out the graveyard that remained, the naked trees chattering in the collied earth, shedding their bones.
It's a forty-five minute drive from Bonners Ferry to the border. Gus spent the whole trip talking, and I know at certain points I was trying to listen, but I only remember bits and pieces, a lot of tiny, insignificant details. He talked about New York—his parents' brownstone in Park Slope, his grandparents' house in Eatons Neck, the F-train up to Manhattan, the family chain of Greek restaurants along the eastern seaboard—and there was some fast-and-loose narration of how it all fell apart—infidelity, a messy divorce, crippling alimony, pre-nups and custody battles and such—and the rest has grown fuzzy with time. Honestly, it was hard to pay attention. I spent the majority of the car ride staring at his nose: straight as a ruler, slightly sunburnt, a hump right in the middle and a smooth ballpoint at the end. If I were to have bitten it off, right then and there, it would've left, I was sure, a perfect triangle in the middle of his face, smooth and pink and bloodless and still, somehow, fucking beautiful.

"My dad still wants me to go to college," he said, five miles to the border. "I missed the deadline to apply, obviously, but… he means next year. He thinks I could get into an Ivy League. Or, like, a CUNY at least. He went to Penn, so I think I'd have an advantage there. I'm sure my mom would have to pay half, but I guess money's still an issue for him. I'm not really interested in college, though. I just don't see the point."

"I'm not going to college," I said, sympathetically.

"Well, obviously you're not. No one in this podunk-ass town knows college from fucking Adam. But I, on the other hand… well, I'm not going to say that, I don't want to sound mean. What I should say is that everyone who keeps telling me college college college is really just… I don't know, trying to scam me, I guess. They don't really know me. No one who really knows me wants me to go to college. And I don't want college. So that's all that should matter, really."

I said nothing. Though he'd been in sixth gear for twenty minutes at this point, he kept his
hand on the stick, tracing his thumb over the grooves. This is my clearest memory of the trip: his hand, all veins and knuckles, and me, greedy, wanting to reach out and grab it like a child in a toy store, _mine mine mine_. I distracted myself staring at the black mountains in the distance, the ruined land, the end of the world. I felt like a criminal in the Silverado, like I'd entered through the back window with a gun in my waistband, waiting to fire it through the side of Gus's perfect skull and finally see what all went on inside of it. I imagined pulling a dagger from the glovebox and holding it to his jugular, what it would feel like for his body to stiffen in my arms as, bit by bit, I unwrapped each layer of the skin around his neck. I shook the thought off. I didn't want to hurt him. I think I felt like an intruder, and if I had to feel like one I wanted him to feel vulnerable, at my mercy. I guess, in a way he wouldn't ever understand, he already was.

"We're there," Gus said after a long stretch of time where I wasn't listening to him at all. A sign on my side indicated the Moyie River, which I could only just make out beneath us by the glimmering white strands where the moonlight shone off the water. "Eastport, Idaho welcomes us," Gus said mockingly, though I couldn't see what he was mocking. Past the river, past the municipal buildings floodlit from beneath like ghost storytellers, past the final warning—_NO RE-ENTRY TO USA_—we cleared the final fork, the point of no return, and followed the concrete pylons into the leftmost lane. "You brought your passport, right?"

"Yes," I said, barely hearing him.

"I can't fucking wait." He physically shook with excitement, rocking the truck cabin. "I bet even the air is different there. Like the whole country is perfumed."

"Uh-huh." On my side of the Silverado, I read the sign in my head like a mantra: _Please remain in vehicle. Restez dans la voiture._

"Cool how everything's in French." Gus drummed his fingers on the wheel like an
arrhythmia. "Res-tezz dance luh voy-churr."

I like him, I think. I'm big enough to admit that. I like him.

"Hm? What was that?"

Oh, I like him so much. I don't want him to go to college, or back to New York, or anywhere. I want him to stay in Idaho. I want to wake up every morning and look out my bedroom window and see him standing there on the other side of the street, waiting for me. No—I want him closer. I want to see him on the other side of the room. I want a gigantic white bed and gigantic white windows, and I want to see him in the gigantic white bathroom rubbing cream into his nose with a toothbrush hanging half out of his mouth. I want to watch him comb his hair and knot his tie and put on socks. I want to have breakfast with him every morning on the porch, in a place where it's always porch season and the French doors stay open all year and our house breathes in and out. I want matching coffee mugs and sides of the bed and caricaturist drawings where we look like killers and photobooth strips taped up on the fridge. I want to be his friend and I want to be him and I want to be Siamese twins and I want to share the same brain. I want to know everything he thinks and bottle it up and drink it like an elixir. I want to drink every last drop of him dry.

"Hel-looooo?" Gus said, waving his hand over my eyes. "Is someone in there?"

A third voice sounded from beyond the Silverado's private realm, unintelligible and irritated. Gus cranked the window down. The border officer approached the truck and asked for our passports. He took one look at Gus's, handed it back, and said something I can't remember now though I do remember my ears were ringing like a bomb had gone off in the other lane.

Gus presented his open hand to me. "Give me your passport. Now."

I fumbled for the passport in my pocket. In my anxious haste, the stupid thing slid out
and fell between the seat and the center console. I crammed my hand down there and attempted to procure it with the tips of my index and middle fingers, while Gus argued with the officer.

"You don't have to be eighteen to cross the border." Gus folded his hands in his lap. "I should know, I've crossed it alone many times."

"Then you'd know you need a parent or guardian to sign off. Tough luck, son."

"Gus," I said, weakly. "Gus, can we go back?"

"Officer, you must understand," Gus said, "this is my brother. Our parents are drunks, you see, bad, bad drunks. And pill bags, too. Oxycontin. We found needles in the toilet tank. They're going to kill us, officer. We had to get out of there, but we have nowhere to go, no family in the states. And you're turning us, two helpless children, turning us away." His voice thickened with tears—real, desperate tears. "Do you really want our blood on the Cretin's hands? Children's blood on the hands of Canada?"

"That's not how you pronounce Chrétien, young man."

"GUS," I cried out, as though from a thousand miles away. They both turned and stared.

"I can't get to my passport, it's wedged too deep. Please. I want to go home."

Gus's entire face seemed to collapse. I've never in my life, before or since this moment, seen someone so devastated before. It was as though he were telling the officer the truth, that we really were running from junkies, and I'd just condemned us to certain death. I looked down at my hands, accusatorily, like they did this. The officer affected a look of pity, momentarily captivated by whatever it was that had really brought us here—not the sob story Gus had invented—and directed us to where we could turn around and head back to Idaho.

We were halfway home when Gus broke the silence. "What was it you said back there?"

I looked at him, befuddled. I didn't know what he was referring to, but it turned out he
was being rhetorical anyway.

"Before that fat jamoke back there turned us away. You said you like me."

"Oh," I said, and then I thought, *What the fuck?* because I didn't remember saying that at all. Of course, I remembered *thinking* it. Perhaps it had come true that Gus and I were so close we were attuned to each other's thoughts via some telepathic dimension, though even then I knew this couldn't be right, because all things considered we were not that close. "Did I?"

"You did." He spoke at a grave pitch. It finally registered that he was furious with me. "And then you started mumbling under your breath like you were having a stroke. And then you spazzed out in front of the jamoke and fucked everything up."

In that moment, what I wanted more than anything, more than French doors and coffee mugs and all that other weird gay shit—what I really wanted was to open the passenger door of the Silverado and leap out at eighty miles an hour, falling into the vortex, my skin and organs smeared along Route 95 for someone to scrape up in the morning, when all of this would be a black smudge of memory Gus would soon forget.

"Listen. I'm glad you like me. Really, I'm tickled." He took a short breath. "But I can't. You're a guy. I just can't."

*Oh, right. I'm a guy,* I thought, as though he'd told me something I hadn't known before. I tossed the word around like a tiny marble of shit in my mouth. *I suppose I am.*

"I mean— okay, that sounds kind of stupid. Obviously, you're a... never mind—"

"You don't have to keep talking, you know." I looked at him. "I don't need the time to pass or anything. You can just sit there and be quiet."

"But I just wanted to say that I like you too."

"No, you don't."
"What are you talking about? Of course I do. I just said I do."

"You don’t…” I took a deep breath, held it there in the boughs of my ribs, for protection. You say it but you don’t believe it. You’re just saying it to say it because it's just… I don't know. You don't like me in a way that matters to me. Just forget I said anything, please."

Another silence enveloped the truck. This time, it felt like a tourniquet, a way to keep this awful thing between us from bleeding out. Each word out of Gus's mouth felt like a laceration, salt in the wound. The headlights on the highway, and the complete darkness wherever they did not reach, made it seem like we were perpetually nearing the edge of an enormous gorge, the double yellow lines like a tongue, forever just about to pull us into the road's maw.

"Okay. That’s okay. Maybe I don’t like you… how you need me to… right now. But it's been fun, right? This has been a fun summer. I wouldn't mind living here for a while."

And perhaps it was the way he said it—so offhanded, so perfectly casual—that convinced me I’d lost him. That I’d made a terrible mistake coming here with him. That this was the last time I would ever see him. I could hear it in his voice, the placations he was making with himself, the strategic rearranging of desire like pieces of an elaborate board game, to make room for me, and my being a guy and all. He liked me, I believed him, but I had not meant what I'd said. *Like* was the wrong word. I was afraid of the other word.

"Please just take me home. I just want to go home."

He scoffed, made an expression I still can't really describe, and accelerated. In another version of this memory, the scoff is a laugh and the expression is a smile, like I've said the funniest thing.

I was beginning to nod off when we returned to Bonners Ferry. Gus dropped me off at my house, hardly even stopping, and revved the engine once as he backed down his driveway. I went
to crawl back through my bedroom window, but someone had shut it. I ran around the house's perimeter, trying the front and back doors and all of the windows; everything was locked, and all the lights were out. It must have been two o'clock by then. I ended up sleeping on one of the wrought-iron deck chairs, under a Jaws beach towel my mom had hung out to dry. The next morning, it was pouring rain, and Toby was the one who found me, throttled me awake, and exclaimed, "HE'S OUT HERE, MOM. I FOUND HIM." My mom came outside in her robe and dragged me by the ear into the house, my sodden clothes leaving a damp trail in the carpet. She deposited me like a corpse on the bathroom floor. "Wash yourself. You're not going anywhere for a long while. Especially not with that metrosexual across the street."

* * *

In another version of the story, I saw Gus the next day, standing in his yard, and even though I thought he might've been waiting for me I didn't come downstairs. In another, the border officer let it slide that we were underage but I still couldn't find my passport in the crevice so we went home anyway. In another, the Silverado was closer to orange than red; in another, it was gray at night and blue during the day. In another, the forest fire I remember seeing on TV was somewhere else, not Idaho. In another, the late-spring blizzard lasted an extra day and we got to play hockey on his driveway after all. In another, I swear Gus was short for August, not Kostas, because the name Kostas Verikakis simply cannot reproduce the ache in my sternum I feel when I utter August Verikakis aloud like an incantation, staring at my bedroom ceiling like a moonless, unturning sky. In another, I turned eighteen in the fall and Gus stayed seventeen forever. In another, we crossed the border into Kingsgate and turned around immediately because I made the same stupid mistake I make in every version of the story, a mistake I cannot omit from my memory no matter how hard I try. In every version of the story, I slept on the deck in the rain and
Gus never came back to find me there, or if he did, I was already asleep and whatever he'd come to say was snatched up in the wind and carried away over the ponderosas, so neither of us ever got the last word. Maybe that means someday one of us will.

* * *

At the end of that summer, Gus traveled with his dad to a funeral in Hoboken. We had not spoken since our trip to the border. A week after he left, he emailed my mom from his dad's account and asked her to let me know he'd changed his mind, that he'd been convinced to apply to college after all. It would be good for him, he said, to be around people that, quote, "push him in the right direction." Of course, this meant he'd be moving back to New York. My mom graciously let me send a reply, in which I wished him well, and told him I would visit if he ever asked, even if it meant stealing the station wagon and taking it cross-country. *Please don't forget me*, I wrote at the end of the email. After sending it, I fell asleep in the computer chair waiting for his response, and when I woke up, it was half past ten in the morning and the house was full of light. I found my brothers on the living room couch in their school clothes, watching the North Tower collapse on the TV. And I guess that's when I knew for certain he was gone.

I visit the memorial in New York every year, in late May when the weather in Idaho turns again and the memories are all too much for me. I circle the South Pool, run my fingers along the names in the parapets, hoping one day I'll find him. I never knew him here, I remember each time; I never knew him in his hometown. Which is to say, I suppose, I never knew him at all.
The last time I went to church was the midnight Easter service my senior year of high school, which I only attended for two reasons: one, my mother would have skinned me alive if I hadn't; and two, my sister Kat and I had a tradition where, after the resurrection, we went to Waffle House in our church clothes and shared an All-Star Special and two Dr. Peppers. In the corner booth, we sang Χριστός ανέστη under our breaths until our heads ached with laughter. Our waitress offered us a half-empty pack of Pall Malls her other table left as a tip—"Half-full, Crystal," Kat said, "think positive," and Crystal laughed tartly. We stacked our plates and left two twenties on the table.

The day of Sunday School graduation, I told my mother, "Religion is an oppressive and domineering force, and it will be the downfall of civilization." I was standing in the kitchen with my hands on my hips. "If you want to miss graduation, that's fine," my mother said, toying with her evil eye rosary in the hall mirror, "though it delights me to know your father and I are paying eighty grand a year for you to go to Northwestern and learn how to say nothing and make it sound intelligent." While I stayed home boycotting my church, they awarded me a scholarship for an essay I'd written about finding one's spirituality amid the politics of organized religion. Apparently, they hadn't understood the essay. Kat accepted the scholarship on my behalf: "Basil will always carry with him the lessons taught by our fellow St. John the Theologian
parishioners." My mother said it embarrassed her deeply that I hadn't been there.

Over the summer, I kept in touch with one person from church: Nico Kyriakou. He went to my high school and his father supervised the altar services—he always got to hold the crucifix at the front of the Great Entrance, an inconsequential form of nepotism that kept him from resenting the church as much as I did. We had a group of high school friends with whom we spent the summer riding our bikes through the university trail, shoplifting Sour Patch Kids from Rite Aid, visiting each other at our ridiculous summer jobs, and playing Truth or Dare in the meadow by Reve C-M's house. The Friday before I moved into my dorm, we had one last hoorah before we parted ways forever. There was a heavy sadness that shaded all the fun we were having, like the last night of summer camp soundtracked by John Denver. It was a quarter past one in the morning when we left the meadow. I offered to drive Nico home; he declined. "What, you're going to walk?" He lived five miles away. "No. I'll just get a ride from someone else, thanks." After that, he stopped responding to my texts. My first weekend in Evanston, I blacked out at a bar with my roommate and texted Nico I missed him and wished he were here with me. I woke up the next morning and found he'd blocked me on all social media. All this is to preface the events of the Toledo Greek Festival three weeks later.

* * *

Unfortunately for me, the parish could not have picked a more beautiful weekend. This morning, I woke up in my dorm to the sound of dripping on my floor, steady and resonant like a bathtub faucet. It was pouring rain outside, and water had pooled on the ledge where I'd left my Spanish pragmatics textbook and an untranslated copy of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. The cover fell apart like toilet paper in my hands. On the drive home from Chicago, along the southern tip of Lake Michigan, the storm only worsened. The Greek Festival historically went on rain or shine,
but I was hopeful anyway; I imagined all the tents and sound equipment flying away in the torrent like cows in a twister movie. But then, just over the Ohio border, it all disappeared—the rain, the fog, the wind—and all at once it was a lovely day. I felt cosmically slighted.

I'm not scheduled to volunteer until five, but the Hellenic dancers have to be there at four-thirty to get ready. Get ready for what, I'm unsure; Kat comes downstairs at four-fifteen already wearing her dancer garb—a white blouse tucked into a burgundy velvet skirt, a mustard-yellow headscarf, tights creased sloppily by the buckles on her shoes. They're tap heels, I realize as she clicks across the kitchen floor. "'Puttin' On The Ritz?'" I say. She kicks me three times in the shin and we leave.

Kat was the one to pick me up from college this morning. I find it strange my mother allowed her to drive to Chicago by herself—she just turned seventeen—but I suppose there was no other choice. My parents are going straight from work to a gala at the Toledo Club, so they can't make it to the festival tonight; they assured Kat they would be there Saturday and Sunday to watch her dance. After I got home and started my laundry, I texted my mother, I'm baaaaaack <3 See you after the fest :)? An hour later, my mother replied, Make sure you get a video of your sister, and keep your thumb out of the frame please. We'll talk tonight. She has a penchant for sounding inadvertantly severe over text, so I think nothing of it.

Outside, Kat says, "I want to drive," as the headlights of our shared Sentra come on. A fresh streak of mud crests over the wheel. "And I get aux. It's my car, now."

"Eat shit, bitch." I fight her off, open the driver's side door, and wedge myself in.

She kicks me four more times until I relent, allowing her to shove me out of the way, climb into the driver's seat, and slam the door shut. She stares at me through the window, all very pleased with herself. I sigh and get in the passenger side.
Little has changed about our relationship since I left for college. The day I moved in, after we finished unloading my stuff from the trunk of my mother's Tahoe, we hugged goodbye, and Kat assured me the next time I saw her she'd be thriving in my absence, finally the only child in the house, top billing. But despite the month apart, we have not become strangers; we are still by equal measures vicious and compassionate. Even this morning, on the stormy drive to Toledo, she told me to kill myself when I skipped a Sharon Van Etten song, and then said she'd missed me so much that one night she watched every video she could find of me in her camera roll until she fell asleep. "At least someone missed me," I said. "Mom and Dad called me once my first week of classes and not at all since then." She rolled her eyes and said, "Mom and Dad won't stop talking about how peaceful the house has been since you've been gone," and I screamed, "SINCE YOU BEEN GOOOOOONE, I CAN BREATHE FOR THE FIRST TIME," and we sang the entire chorus a capella and forgot what we were talking about.

Halfway to the church, it occurs to me to text Nico and let him know I'll be at the festival. I'm grateful to find all our texts are still there—he hasn't blocked my number yet—but then unsettled to see the contents of my last messages to him:

Fri Sep 3 11:23pm

nico!! how you been!!

i miss u and everyone else. chicago is sm fun but still

im out w my roommate and this bar doesnt card, just like the movies lol

wish you were here haha

anyway if you want to visit ever lmk!!!!! talk to you soon
Sat Sep 4 1:47am

chicagoooooo

so funn ufund funn!!1 1

visiti memeeeee visit me

whey are you not reosoonding? what did i diooo

cunt bitch fucker dick cocksucker asshole ποντάνα μαλάκα ass-munch dick-suck

cunt-picking big-backed shit bag fuckwad cum dumpster

I turn off my phone. Perhaps it's best to hope Nico doesn't come to the festival at all.

The Greek Orthodox Church of St. John the Theologian is not in an excellent part of town. The cathedral itself is falling apart: parts of the steps have crumbled in places like old cake, bits of stone burbling down onto the sidewalk; a wasp nest rocks above the oak doors. Beside the church is a small lawn cut down the middle by a gravel path leading to an enormous disused parking lot in the back. On the other side of the grass is the education building, which houses the Sunday School classrooms, clerical offices, and the banquet room where reception is held after service. When we arrive, the side lot beside the church is full, and the larger lot beside the education building has been fenced off to accommodate a suburb of bounce houses. Two children flop around on the floor of the yellow-and-blue castle like petulant drunks. We pull into the grass lot across the street. A tall boy in a neon vest—a civilian, what Kat and I call non-Greeks at the festival—approaches the passenger window and asks me for five dollars. I ask if volunteers and dancers get free parking; he says no. He is impatient while we scrounge for money in the center console. We come up with six dead vapes, four chapsticks, a nail clipper, a crushed tube of Aquaphor, a cellophane pouch of gummy bears, a few crumpled receipts, seven
dimes, two pennies, but no bills; Kat is messy, but not careless apparently. "Just go ahead," he says when another car pulls up behind us. We park at the end of a row of cars set at an diagonal, pursuant to the extraordinarily bad parking of the GMC Sierra at the other end. While I scan the festival entrance for Nico or his father, Kat deposits something on my left thigh.

"Oh, thanks." It's a singular gummy bear from the pouch in the console, coated in sugar crystals. Without thinking twice, I eat it. "Mmm, invigorating. Yes, this will fill me up."

Kat looks at me. "What was—? Did you really just eat that?"

"Yeah, why?" Her face blanches. "Jeez, Kat, what was it, an edible or something?" I ask, rhetorically. But then, as the last of it goes down my throat, the taste—blue raspberry, overly saccharine—becomes something else, earthy and tannic. "Oh, shit. It was an edible, wasn't it?"

"I didn't think you'd actually eat it." She looks sheepish. "That was for me."

I try to act unfazed. "Where, might I ask, did you acquire edibles?"

"You know your friend, Reve? Her sister got them for me."

"Zulie C-M buys you edibles?"

"I mean, technically Anais Mulder's cousin does. He lives in Michigan." I stare at the glovebox. "Basil, how are you shocked? Where did you think I got my vapes?"

"I figured you shoplifted them because you're a juvenile delinquent."

"Oh my God, you're such a square." She takes another gummy bear out of the pouch and puts it in her mouth, gnawing carefully. Once she swallows, she crams the pouch in the bottom of her canvas tote, swollen with a change of civilian clothes. "Look. Now we're even."

"Am I going to go crazy?" I ask, earnestly. I've never ingested weed before. "Like, how many milligrams are in one of these shits?"

"Ten."
"Well." I deliberate this information. "That… well, that means nothing to me."

"You'll be fine," Kat says, opening her door. "I take one of these every year and I always have a blast. I couldn't get through an entire weekend of this shit without them." She comes to the passenger side and motions for me to get out. "So just relax and try to have fun, God forbid."

"Not like I might have to talk to someone important," I grumble. "Wait, every year? How long have you been doing this and I didn't know?" She shrugs, grinning like an asshole. We walk together to the festival entrance, where she splits off and heads inside the education building.

I admit the Greek Festival is potentially a lot of fun for the civilians. The parish has outdone themselves this year: miniature Greek flags line the gravel path into the festival grounds; a blue fingerpost points to the gyros and fries, the taverna, the loukoumathes, the dinner line. The lines outside the white tents are long and dense like gator tails, attendees squinting in the sun, ouzo slushies and Michelob Ultras sweating in their hands. Past the fingerpost, a tight archipelago of fold-out tables and chairs, occupied by men, women, and children in cargo shorts and spaghetti straps. They nibble carefully on their gyros, creamy tomatoes spilling into their trays. Just past the back of the education building, they've cordoned off the dancefloor with a large white circle painted on the asphalt; beyond that, a live band plays on a small, cluttered stage. I'm sure, if this weren't my seventh year in a row volunteering, and if the festival weren't crawling with church people whom I either detest, pity, or am actively avoiding, I would find the ordeal more enjoyable. But everything is demystified for me now. All I can think about is how I'm going to negotiate getting out of it tomorrow and Sunday.

The blonde woman in the ticketing booth is familiar: a younger mother, probably. She's wearing bleach-speckled jeans and this year's festival T-shirt: cobalt blue, white lettering, capital sigmas for the Es in TOLEDO GREEK FESTIVAL—exactly the same as always except they've
also added a tagline: *Gyros. Ouzo. Dancing.* I think I've served her communion bread before; if she were wearing her church clothes, the khaki trench coat and Macy's perfume all the women swear by, I might remember her name. She doesn't have a nametag.

"I'm a volunteer," I say. "I don't still have to pay, do I?"

"You're Basil Tsakalidis, right?" she asks, ignoring my question. "Katerina's brother?"

"Yeah. I used to be an altar boy."

"You got the Philoptochos scholarship last year? And went to Northwestern?" She phrases her sentences as questions that answer themselves, as though to say, *you have no anonymity here.* She doesn't smile. "How is everything there?"

"Good. Hard, but good."

"I don't know if you have to pay." She looks bored with me, her eyes unfocusing. "Talk to Carla at the volunteer tent."

"Oh, okay."

I walk past I.D. check toward the volunteer tent, where three fold-out tables shrouded in disposable blue tablecloths form a block U against the side of the education building. The woman sitting at the front table is not Carla, but Presvytera Esther Pavlides, the wife of the priest Father Tassos. She's fanning her face with the laminated instructions for the nametag printer, her black hair pulled into a sparky bun. When I approach, she smiles but does not stop fanning her face. "Are you not boiling in that?"

I'm wearing a camo windbreaker over my T-shirt and shorts. "I get chilly easily."

"It was supposed to be in the sixties today," the woman at the leftmost table says. This is also not Carla—her nametag is in Greek, Κλετάκι, and as I sound out the characters in my head I realize it looks like I'm staring at her chest. "Now we're nearing eighty-five."
"Is Vasilios fine for your tag, sweetheart?" Pres Esther asks.

"Basil is better," I say. My name is not Vasilios; Pres Esther is the only person who calls me that. She's only a quarter Greek, from her maternal grandmother; her maiden name is Cromwell. Even when she says Vasilios, her accent is cautious and gargled. But she is insistent on performing that fraction of her heritage as though it's all she's ever known. She's also the only one who pronounces the E in Katerina instead of just saying Katrina like everyone else. I watch her type one letter on the keyboard, search, type another, search, type another, and so on until a nametag blooms out of the printer. It says Βάσιλ. "I didn't realize it'd be in Greek."

"I bet you'd prefer Vasilios now, huh?" Pres Esther winks at me.

The third woman turns and asks Pres Esther if we sell the festival T-shirts in infant sizes. She is also not Carla; her nametag says Τούλα. There is apparently no Carla at the volunteer tent, unless it's the woman in capris on the other side of Toula's table, holding her baby by its armpits with her other hand on her hip. Which is unlikely.

"No, Toula," she says, irritated. Then, to the other woman, brightly, "Sorry, we don't!"

Kletaki rolls her eyes. The other woman scoffs and leaves, as though the T-shirt were all she came for. Pres Esther says to me, "I know you're supposed to do pastries, but they have enough volunteers, so I'm putting you in the dinner line. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, that's okay," I say, like she isn't ruining my life. I signed up for the pastry line because it's inside the banquet hall, it's easy to swipe galaktoboureko when no one is looking, and the ladies there have no reservations about gossiping with me. But mostly because, if Nico comes through, I can slip into the kitchen, pretend I need fresh air, and wait until he leaves. Pres Esther offers to sign me up for pastries tomorrow at noon, an offer I decline perhaps too eagerly.

"Also," I say, "I'm supposed to talk to someone named Carla?"
"Carla's not here until seven," Toula says, like I should've known.

"Okay, that's fine." I walk away without asking about my ticket. Behind me, I can hear Toula muttering something to Kletaki, hissing when she pronounces the s in my name.

The dinner line is on the other side of the education building. I scope the scene for church people—Father Tassos making rounds in his regalia, a fellow altar boy leading a group of civilian friends like a tour guide, some familiar-looking parents, but no sign of Nico. Near a cluster of tables, Mrs. Doukas, the dance teacher, corrals the AHEPA dancers, children ten and under, who pick their noses and try to affect their abhorrence to their parents from across the dancefloor. Between songs, the band tunes their bouzoukia. The queue at the dinner line snakes neatly from beneath the tent out past the loukoumathes. When I approach the cashier's table from the back side, Mr. Georgios turns around and exhales with exaggerated relief. He's halfway throughringing up a seventy-dollar order. "Thank God. Can you take over the other register?"

"I haven't used these new tablet things before," I say, hopefully.

"You'll figure it out." Then, to the line, he says, "Everyone, the second register is open, let's split up, please!"

My first customer is a civilian man. He is impolite. I have to use the search function on the tablet for every item, most of which are logged by their Greek names—spanakopita, tiropita, dolmathes. Evidently he has somewhere to be. "My total should be thirty fifty," he says. When I finish ringing his food up, the tablet corroborates his math. "Look at that," he says, "told you so," as he raps his Amex on the tap-to-pay puck.

The next four customers are all church people. "Nice to see you, Basil," Mrs. Rouste-mis murmurs. She looks troubled and displeased to see me, like I'm her loan shark. I ask her to lift the lid of her styrofoam container so I can see what food she's purchasing, and she looks
confused for a moment. "You need to see my food?" she asks. I tilt my head. *Didn't she do the dinner line last year?* "I suppose that's fine." She has two souvlakia, an extra scoop of rice pilaf, and a water bottle. Trying to be charming, I say, "Looks yummy. Better hide that from me, I might steal it!" I laugh to clarify I'm joking, but she looks gravely offended and walks away. The woman behind her, Mrs. Vlachos, marches right past my table without paying for her food.

I look over at Mr. Georgios's line—it's significantly longer than mine, which irrationally upsets me. A lump forms in my throat when the last person in my line leaves and no one is behind them. To keep myself from crying, I open my phone camera and study my reflection for blemishes, food in my teeth or shit in my hair. This, to me, is the only explanation—there must be something about my physical appearance that wards people off, a red aura around me like a video game villain, auguring woe and doom. I text Kat, *can i just sit w you until your dance. your edible is not edible-ing.* A few civilians line up at my table and I put my phone away.

Then my blood runs cold: Nico's father is in my line.

I never liked Mr. Kyriakou. Even before I had a good reason not to, his presence behind the altar was oppressive; he was always too loud, too lazy, too quick to insult one of us if we crossed him. Though the precise obligations of his job were murky, in practice it entailed sitting on a chair in the back, complaining about his herniated disc, and making sure none of the altar boys started a fire in the bathroom. My earliest memory of him, I was twelve, and it was my first year serving in the altar: he went on some tirade of a nature I can't remember now, probably about how terrible our country had become, how society had bastardized the nuclear family—the usual subjects. What I specifically recall is him saying, "And now they're letting fags get married and fuck in public," because immediately after, Nico came in and told us the Great Entrance was starting, and I thought the moment had solid comedic timing. Since Nico graduated, some other
schmuck has taken over the altar services, and Mr. Kyriakou seems to have gained no fewer than one thousand pounds—apparently, lifting himself into and out of his designated chair beside the robe closet was all the exercise he was getting. He hasn't seen me yet, but I can feel my heart thudding behind my eyes, triple meter like the music—\textit{thump thump thump thump thump thump}. 

I finish cashing out the person in front of me and excuse myself without looking back. There's some miffed groaning behind me as I walk away. Nico is nearby—I can sense it, like how livestock sense natural disasters. I'm not even sure anymore if I want to keep avoiding him or just rip the band-aid off; it seems inevitable we run into each other anyway. But even this decision is debilitating, and all I want is to find an empty Sunday School classroom and hide in it until all my problems magically resolve themselves. My phone buzzes in my windbreaker pocket. I whip it out, my chest aching. For some reason, I thought it'd be Nico. Instead, it's Kat: 

\textit{basil please tell me its not true}

I text back, \textit{huh??????}

\textit{come upstairs}, she replies. \textit{now, please.}

* * *

In my shock, I don't even sound shocked. My voice comes out small: "What?"

"You heard me." Kat's eyes ripple. "I'm seriously going to freak, Basil. Tell me it's not true."


This is the lie: the last Friday of summer, Nico and I and our high school friends went to the meadow. We played Truth or Dare. Nico was dared to kiss me on the lips for ten seconds. He declined the dare, saying he didn't feel comfortable. He was double-dared. He still refused. He was triple dog dared. One knows one cannot pass on a triple dog dare. He obliged, but said he'd
only kiss me on the cheek—*Okay*, he said, *let's get it over with*. He leaned in and planted an itty-bitty peck, hardly making contact. I took him by the chin and pulled him in, his mouth onto mine. He resisted, he pushed, he fought, but I wouldn't relent. I bound his hands in one of mine like cuffs, pinning his wrists to the ground. With the other, I smoothed his chest, his ribs, his stomach. I felt the inside of his thigh, palmed his crotch. He squirmed against my touch, tensed all over, puffed air in his cheeks, turned red with effort, but I would not let go until ten seconds had passed. *There*, I said when it was over. *Was that so bad?*

"Why would they say you did that?" Kat is sitting at one of the desks in the Sunday School classroom. The rest of the dancers have cleared out; drawstring bags and water bottles lie strewn about the room. "I mean, I believe you. But why?"

"I don't know, Kat." My knees are going weak. "Who told them? Who started it?"

"I heard it from Gina Petridis. I don't know, she was talking to someone else. Said something about, like, sexual assault, and then she said your name." She uses her headscarf to wipe a tear from one eye, and leaves the other running. "I'm like, what are you talking about? She gets all quiet. 'I thought he would've told you.' Basil, I was going to fucking throw up."

"Who did she hear it from?"

"I don't know," she says, faintly. "I didn't ask."

"You didn't *ask?*"

"Basil, what was I—? I can't— I thought you'd, like, molested someone."

"This is really serious," I say, my voice shuddering at the end. "What am I going to do? What am I going to do? They think I'm a sex offender. Fuck. Kat. They think I'm a *sex offender*. The whole time I've been here… Oh, my God, I can't do it. I can't. I can't go back out there." I put my hands on my head. "Kat, I need you to give me another gummy bear."
"Are you fucking insane?" She stands up. "Absolutely not, no way."

"This one's not even working, I swear." I spread my arms like an eagle and balance on one foot, hardly swaying. "If I were stoned, could I do this?"

"Jesus Christ, Basil," Kat says, shaking her head. "You know it's, like, a classic thing to say, 'This edible ain't shit,' take another one, and get absolutely railed, right?"

"Yes, but it's been, like, forty-five minutes and I still don't feel—"

I snatch Kat's tote off the chair beside her and dash out the door. She runs after me into the hallway, dimly lit by the windows looking down into the banquet room. "You fucking asshole, put my shit down, now, give it now!" I hold the tote upside-down as she chases me up and down the hallway, her clothes flying out like ribbons. The pouch of gummy bears hits my foot and skitters off into the corner. I dive after it; Kat leaps on top of me and struggles to wrench it from my hands. "They're not yours, give it!" One of us tears the bag: the multicolored gummy bears burst out and scatter on the carpet. I grab one and put it in my mouth while Kat paws blindly for the others. "Damn it, they're covered in dust now."

"Text me when you're about to go on," I say, collecting myself. "I need to find Nico."

"Wait, Basil, hold on," Kat says, trying to catch me by the sleeve of my windbreaker, but I'm already gone. "Get back here!" I trample down the stairs into the lobby. The lights are off—civilians are not permitted back here—but I make my way through by the blue glow of someone's LED headlights outside the door. The banquet room is packed. Where is Nico? Everyone to my left seems preoccupied with the gift shop—the coffee table books, the crewneck sweaters, the icons and votive candles, the evil eye jewelry—and on my right, the pastry line weaves through a labyrinth of stanchion rope. No one is looking at me. I haven't blown my cover. Of course, there is no longer a cover to blow: the entire church has already suffixed my
name—Basil Tsakalidis, Pr., they call me, Predator. I feel the epithet follow me like a HATE ME sign gorilla-glued to my back. I make my way through the crowd. "Oops, sorry, 'scuse me, pardon me," I say, until I realize these are mostly civilians, who don't give a fuck about me or anyone who actually makes the festival happen as long as they can get their treats and their tchotchkes, whereupon I start pushing and shoving. Courtesy doesn't come naturally to predators, and I have a reputation to uphold. Everyone towers over me like storied redwoods and sequoias, half-flesh, half-bark, arranging themselves into a Japanese suicide forest, no way out. Oh, this must be the first one, I think as the sequoias crane their branches over my head until there is no ceiling or sky, just black canopy, and I remind myself I am abnormal, anomalous, an outsider, a stranger. Where is Nico? I compose myself and walk normally—everything is fine—as though I can outsmart the suicide forest, make myself seem unmoved by its forces so it might cease to exist. The other side of the banquet room recedes backward and then slingshots itself forward, over and over until the trees around me all brown with winter and become tall, twiggish candle wicks in the snow, which only I can see, and then I'm at the door. When did I get to the door? When did I make it to the other side? Where is Nico? Such queries matter more to me than breathing. I'm thirsty. Outside, the air is so, so warm. The air is gray and thick and I want to take all my clothes off and let it press me into the pavement and run its hands down my naked back, and in this fantasy there are no such things as itching or tickling or pins and needles or limbs falling asleep, and all sense of touch is supplied externally, where I can see it. But I don't actually take my clothes off because that's something a stoned person would do, and in case you were unaware—yes, you, the reader, you will know this: I am not stoned. The second edible is not hitting me at all; the first one, maybe a tad, but nothing life-changing. I'm thirsty. Before me, the festival spreads out like a fantasy land. Each white tent is a cube of light, varied in dimension
though all miraculously reachable from where I'm standing. If I dared, I could pluck a single gyro wrap off the grill from a thousand feet away, but then that gyro wrap would be smaller than a grain of sand between my forefinger and thumb—alas, such are the limitations of my newfound omnipotence. Wait, wait, wait—I am not omnipotent, I remind myself, because omnipotence is something only a stoned person would think they have. If I were omnipotent, I would have prepared in advance an agenda of things to accomplish before my omnipotence fades as it inevitably would; I must have this agenda because without it, I would be so blinded with power the first thing I'd do would probably be getting some goddamn water because I'm so fucking thirsty. And that would be a waste of omnipotence. Where is Nico? I suppose at one point I was afraid to see him, afraid that in his expression, even from a distance, I'd see the entire ugly truth of why he's been ignoring me. But now, I know the ugly truth. I know the things he's lied about, the carnage he's wrought. I see it in the disgusted faces of everyone around me, the people who trusted me, awarded me a scholarship, prayed I'd one day return to them filthy and kneeling and ready to be saved. They want nothing to do with me now. Not that I ever wanted anything to do with them, but still: I have lost something forever and it is his fault. I didn't ask for this. I didn't dare him to kiss me in the meadow. I didn't force him to hold my face like a delicate bird in his hands as he did it; I didn't force him to enjoy it. And it's not my fault the memory is so lucid, even now, that I can shut my eyes and it all comes back to me: the midnight breeze, the chapped braille of his lips, the bend of the bulrushes, the full moon like a dollar coin in the starless sky. It is not my fault—it is not, it is not, I insist to no one because I am not omnipotent and I cannot simply excise the rumor from existence like a tumor, and I cannot change how things turned out between Nico and me, and I cannot erase the memories of everyone at this godforsaken festival. That's what I'd do with my omnipotence: I'd make them all forget I ever existed, and I'd never see
any of them again. After that, I'd get myself some fucking water because *holy shit am I thirsty.* Then: where the *hell* is Nico? I look up and I've somehow ended up back at the volunteer tent. Pres Esther and Kletaki and Toula are gone; a new woman is manning the tent by herself. Her nametag says Κάρλα. "Carlaaaaaa!" I say, soliciting a high-five. She looks confused but delighted. Her face is smooth and pale and ovular as an egg. "I don't have a ticket, Carla, I'll level with you. Can you help me? I got no money." Now she just looks confused. Before she can respond, a tree erupts from the gravel behind me like an obelisk; I can hear its branches snapping into place, though the sound seems to travel through amber, it does not echo. I jump, startled by the tree's appearance. *That was close,* I think, wondering how I'd play it off had the tree caught on my windbreaker and hoisted me into the sky. *I know what this looks like, believe me,* I'd say, *but I'm not high, I'm just a victim of a truly bizarre circumstance and I need assistance getting down, please.* When I turn around, I find the tree is not a tree, but in fact it is His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros. Pres Esther and Father Tassos flank him on either side. "Basil, what's up, buddy?" Father Tassos says, patting me on the shoulder. He is a cool priest, I concede; he used to come back behind the altar with us, tugging at the collar of his regalia, and say, *This thing is so fucking hot,* and we'd laugh and laugh like comedy had been reborn. It occurs to me he and Pres Esther must not yet know what is being said about me. "You've met His Eminence before, I take it? Greek Fest 2019?" His Eminence shakes my hand, his movements austere. "How are you, young man? What's your name?" I manage to tell him without shitting down the back of my leg. We exchange three minutes of conversation during which I keep asking him to repeat himself. "What do you study at Northwestern?" His Eminence asks. I try to say I'm planning on majoring in Spanish, but for some reason I tell him in Spanish. "Pues que aprendí un poco de castellano," he says, wistfully, "durante el ratito que pasé yo en Andalucia, hace..."
I understand him perfectly. "Bueno, tengo yo que irme," I say, "pero, ¡qué gusto conocerle a usted! Bezasos y abrazotes, Eminencia." His Eminence looks at me strangely. *Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck,* I think, *they know I'm baked. Fuck fuck fuuuuuck.* Then I stop thinking, in case His Eminence can read minds. *I love Christ and all things I can do through His glory or whatever.* "It's nice to see you, Basil," Father Tassos says, through a grim smile. I turn around: Carla has disappeared. The world feels full and heavy like an unbroken jar of peanut butter. Above the education building, the sun is coming down; long, sharp shadows yawn across the festival like a colorless paper skyline. I ask the paper shadows: where is Nico? Suddenly, in front of me appears a small red ball of thread, floating at chest height above the ground. As soon as I see it, the ball begins to unspool itself, shooting forward and out of sight like a comet from another universe in which everything is made of yarn. I follow the thread, collecting it as I go. The thread takes me back into the education building—*No,* I tell the thread, *I don't want to go back in there.* *The sequoias, the sequoias!* The thread says something portentous in Latin. *Jesus Christ, okay.* There are much fewer people in the banquet room than before, a scattering of civilians at tables picking at their baklava. The Hellenic dancers are going on soon, I remember. *Shit, the dancers. I need to get a video.* But the thread wants what the thread wants. I follow it into the lobby and up the stairs. The thread is thinning out, now only a few frayed filaments, and then a white care tag to marcate the end of its length. I was hoping, at the end of the thread, there would be a vending machine full of free water, but instead it's the Sunday School classroom where I started. I curse the thread, but its bunched corpse has disappeared from my hands. I turn the doorknob and enter the dark room. When I flip the lights, Nico is there waiting for me.

"Fuck, turn that light back off," he says. His words are full of phlegm, his face starched. I
don't move, as though seeing him has turned me to stone. "Fine. Don't. I don't care."

I don't say anything. He hasn't changed at all since I left for college. Even his hair is the same length, curled up where his neck becomes his back. I watch him trace abstract shapes on the desk. He seems appropriately tortured, which infuriates me; I want to punish him, but he's already punishing himself, or at least pretending to. It's throwing me off.

"You found me, I guess." He throws his hands up. "You want to kill me, I bet?"

I nod. "But it's fine."

"Not really." He laughs rudely. "I did something wrong. I should pay for it."

"It's okay," I lie. Then I try to ask, Why—? but I can't figure out the words to describe what he did, so all that comes out is a hoarse, "Why?"

"Why should I pay for it?"

"Why?" I repeat. "Never mind. Forget it." I turn to walk out, no longer interested in whatever spit-up apology he's planning.

He stands and follows me out into the hallway. "Basil, wait, hold on."

"I need water," I say. He follows me to the drinking fountain, glowing faintly like a forest spring that grants eternal youth. The water is perfect. He stands beside me until I finish drinking.

"Can I say my piece, please?" Even in the dimness, I can make out his simple features, his generic-brand attractiveness. "Please?"

"Fine. Make it quick, my sister is dancing."

He breathes in. "One of our friends recorded us. In the meadow, that night. I don't remember who—don't look at me like that." I didn't even realize I was looking at him a certain way. "I don't know. But people were asking me about it. People from church, mostly. Luke Pappas, actually, he texted me, like, You and Basil T, like, fucking or something? I don't know. I
panicked, okay? What was I supposed to do? What would you do if your parents found out you were… like, making out with guys? How would you feel?"

*I need not imagine*, I want to say. When I come home tonight, my parents will be waiting for me in the living room. They will not know which to address first: that I sexually assaulted someone, that I sexually assaulted someone from *church*, or that I sexually assaulted a *boy from church*. But I don't tell Nico this. I need him to finish his defense, to feel the soft glimmer of relief when he thinks he's absolved himself, so I can crush it.

"I don't want it to sound rude when I say this, Basil, but… this community, this church, my father, the festival, everything: it's all really important to me. Not that it's not important for you, I guess, but it's *really* important for me. I mean, this is my life. My family, my faith, my culture—this is all I have. You can't act like you love this church or the people in it, 'cause, like, I know how much you were dying to never show your face here again, so… don't go and pretend you're losing out on so much. You threw away this community a long time ago, and… I guess what I'm trying to say is, it was only a matter of time. And I have more to lose."

My ears burn at the tips. I want to push past my muteness and really tear him a new one, take all the misery and agony he's brought upon me and foist it back onto him. But I can't, because he's right. This is all he has, and I am entitled to none of it. All through high school, he tolerated my constant bitching and moaning, the way I couldn't help mocking everyone in church for their accents, their gaudy attire, their closed-mindedness. "How stupid do you have to be to believe in this stuff?" I'd routinely say, before affecting an apologetic look at Nico, who was, indeed, stupid enough to believe in this stuff. He's right: I couldn't wait to get out. How can I hate him when all he's done is lock the door behind me?

I don't even register what's happening until his lips are pressed against mine. The feeling
is unsatisfying: he tastes like parched bubblegum and tzatziki, and he braces himself aggressively on my shoulders like he's trying to shake me out of a trance. I swoon with an instant headache, sullying what minimal bliss I was gleaning from the edibles. If I'm being honest, it's so bad it ruins the formerly pleasant memory of our first kiss, shrouding it in a sooty layer of unreliability. When he pulls away, I must not be masking my displeasure very well because he goes ashen in the face and bolts downstairs, leaving me alone in the dark hallway.

* * *

Back outside, everything seems brighter. I wonder if the tangerine stripe around the sky is actually the sun rising instead of setting—that would explain everything, why I'm suddenly so exhausted, why it feels like I've been here for hours longer than I actually have.

A crowd has gathered to watch the Hellenic dancers. They've dragged one of the fold-out tables onto the dancefloor; the music is familiar, steady and tense—they're doing the Zeibekiko. The five boy dancers in matching white foustanellas march in time around the table, rallying behind the tallest one: lithe, alacritous, his feet landing softly on the asphalt. There's a sharp tremolo in the music as he leaps onto the table. He dangles a handkerchief over the other four, who form a cohort around him, their palms flat on the table's surface. One of them holds the free end of the handkerchief as the boy on the table extends one leg out and, balanced on the other, bends backward, lower and lower until his head is grazing the table, his silhouette against the stadium lights like a finger pointed at the rising moon. The boy leaps upright, and the audience cheers. One of the girl dancers, spectating from the edge of the stage, trots onto the dancefloor with a glass of wine. The boy repeats the motions of grabbing the handkerchief and bending backwards, lower and lower. When his head grazes the table, the girl places the wine glass on his forehead. The boy turns carefully on the ball of his foot without tipping the glass, the red liquid
sloshing around the rim. With his free hand, he takes the glass and pours the contents into his open mouth; wine splashes all over his face, runs into his hair like blood. The audience gasps. The boy stands, smashes the glass on the table, and cries, "Ώπα!" The audience applauds wildly.

The song ends, and another begins. All the dancers, including Kat, line up along the diameter of the dancefloor. When I bring up my phone camera, it shows me my own face. My eyes are blazing, irises blue as jungle flowers. I am sobbing, I realize. I flip the camera so it shows the dancefloor and hit record. But the dancers do not dance—instead, they start bowing. The applause roars around me. I stop recording and wipe my face with the sleeves of my windbreaker. The dancers disperse and return to their families. A new text appears at the top of my screen, from my mother: Your father and I are on our way home. When you get here, we need to have a talk. Don't dilly-dally.

Kat runs up to me. Her hair is tacky with sweat. "How are you feeling?" she asks, as of yet unaware I missed her entire set.

"Bad," I manage to say. My mouth is dry and gummy.

"Descriptive. Are you doing the Zorba with me?"

"Sure."

I follow her onto the dancefloor. A circle of people forms at my sides, dancers and parishioners and civilians alike. I'm expecting a procession of snarled expressions, dappled chins and puckered lips, but no one notices me at all. When I leave today, I realize, I will be excommunicated from the church—explicitly or otherwise, though it won't be my choice—and I will become like every other clueless civilian here, picking the onions out of their gyros, mispronouncing moussaka, saying Ώπα! just because. But unlike them, I had it once: my culture was inalienable, something I could not rid myself of no matter how I tried, and I've managed to
squander it anyway. For all my ingratitude, I wish I could say, through a bullhorn so everyone in Toledo can hear, *I was wrong. I just needed time to grow up. Please, give me one more chance.*

The Zorba begins. We move slowly at first, stepping on each other's toes, but as the music swells, an energy roils at the center of the circle like a cyclone, pulling us all into its orbit. There, across the circle, is Nico and his father, too concentrated to see me. Mr. Kyriakou is uncoordinated but enjoying himself. I wonder what he'd do if he saw me, if he'd call my name, summon me into the center, wait until everyone was watching, and announce, *This kid molested my son.* The image of his red, porky face strobos in my mind as I try to focus on the dance. Step step turn. Step step turn. The core moves are always the same; it isn't hard to learn, though perhaps these things come easily for me because Greek dance is technically in my blood. Soon, our steps turn into skips, and the skips turn into leaps, and at intermittent moments the circle is airborne. The music accelerates. Between the measures, the direction changes; our heads snap one way and then the other, teeth bared in wild smiles. Then the circle splits: every other person steps forward and grabs a new pair of hands, forming a second, smaller circle nested within the larger. Here, I am spotted—Nico, across the inner circle, catches my eye; Mr. Kyriakou stares from the outer ring, his face stretched in a grave frown. *Watch,* I command him. *Watch. Watch.* *See for yourself.* The circle tightens. Again, then again. When we kick our feet, the tips of our shoes nearly touch. The outer ring loops around us like a solar system, each individual spinning in place. The circle tightens. Again, then again. I wrench my hands free and step into the center. The dancers scramble to pull me back, pawing at my forearms. The circle tightens. Again, then again. I remain still as it revolves around me, Nico's face shuttering past. The music wails, frantic as sirens. Then the circle goes still. Everyone watches. Nico, in front of me, his breath quick against my nose. He stares into my burning eyes—sure, so sure, knowing nothing at all.
The circle tightens around us, becomes a square. A line. Two dots on the asphalt. One.
ANNIHILATION
8,517 words

Aunt Niamh was the last to arrive for Thanksgiving. From the dining room, I watched her heft a baking dish of tiramisu through her passenger window, one red heel kicked up. My brother Tommy had just finished setting the table, and when he saw her Pontiac at the end of our half-circle driveway, behind my cousin Anais's Saturn, he came beside me at the window and mumbled something about *Mom and her charity cases*.

"You're such an asshole," I said, marching out of the room. Moments later, the doorbell rang. "Get the door, asshole!"

"You get the door!" Tommy called after me, but I was already gone.

Three days before, I received what would be my last email from my advisor Geoff, begging me to schedule an appointment so we could review my performance in the courses from which I had not yet been automatically dropped. The subject line said, *FINAL WARNING!!!!* I read his email the first time in the elevator of my apartment building, then a few more times in the security line at the Richmond Airport, and then several more times standing at the kitchen island while my family made comments about my generation and our electronics. Only once my mother asked what could've been so important that I was ignoring my uncle did I put my phone down. None of them knew I was about to fail out of college. I'd been unbearably anxious for days, on the flight to Detroit during which I was already airsick, and in my sister Maddie's car on
the way to Ann Arbor; I imagined walking into the house and my parents smelling it on me, and before the holiday began I would've already ruined it. Most haunting, though, was the lack of foresight: there was nothing to compare it to. It was probably the worst thing any of us had ever done; I had no way of preemptively measuring my parents' fury.

The only other person who knew was Tommy. It happened after Geoff's first email, which had been comparatively cheerful: he'd wanted to know why I hadn't attended any classes or completed any assignments in three weeks, and whether there was any support he could offer to facilitate my transition into the fall semester. I had a minor freakout and panic-dialed Tommy. "I'm fucked," I said. "I'm so incredibly fucked." He told me plenty of students went through burnout, especially in their junior year. "Even I did," he said, which made me feel worse. I instantly regretted telling him anything. Tommy was the worst kind of snitch—an unintentional one, sweet, well-meaning, but incapable of keeping a secret. It was my intention to update him with only good news so he'd think my situation was improving—which had been tricky to do faithfully, so eventually I started outright lying—but once I read Geoff's last email, I called Tommy before my flight and said, "I'm so super mega ultra triple-decker deluxe fucked." He said we'd talk about it when I got home. But I didn't want to talk about it. Maybe, I thought, in Maddie's car, if I don't bring it up he won't say anything.

Maddie sensed something wrong with me. "What are you so tense about?"

"Nothing," I lied. When it was clear she didn't buy it, I said, "Is Mom really inviting Aunt Niamh to Thanksgiving? She cannot think that'll go over well."

"Of course it won't."

"Dad's family is going to eat her alive."

"Of course they are."
I squinted at her. "Is it true that when women turn thirty they start forgetting they were ever young and unwise, and that's why they act like everything is obvious and if it's not, then you're stupid?"

"I don't know," Maddie said, refusing to humor me, "give me three months and then I can tell you." After a moment, she continued, "And I don't think you're stupid. I mean, Frankie, you're obviously the smartest person in this family by a mile, but you don't... have all the context. I've been a part of this family for much longer than you have."

"You're not really disproving my point."

* * *

Tommy had made a seating chart for Thanksgiving dinner. This, I discovered as we all began to gather in the dining room—sans my parents, who were in the kitchen butchering the turkey—and I found my name on a place card between my mother's and my Uncle Vern's. Already, I knew it was going to be that kind of holiday. Tommy had written full names: Vernon, Lawrence, Cassiopeia, Madison, Thomas, Zulema, Gregory, Naoise, and mine, Frances. The table was perfectly set: water glasses full, wine glasses empty and waiting; saffron charger plates and matching cloth napkins; salt and pepper shakers shaped like hens; pillar candles in hurricane vases; and an uninspired centerpiece, sticks and leaves piled in an approximate pyramid. I wondered where Tommy—who at twenty-five years old still went to restaurants and ordered a well-done filet mignon in a throaty French accent—learned to set a dinner table.

"I tried to be thoughtful about where people are sitting," Tommy said, supervising from the head of the table, "so please try not to move around."

The dining room was one of several enormous, impressive rooms on the first floor of my parents' house, which they built themselves, the summer after Maddie graduated high school
eleven-some years ago. Before that, we'd lived in my father's hometown on the Yoop, in this beautiful old ranch with mosaic kitchen tiles, crayon on the walls, and a wood-burning fireplace. We were the last of my father's family to leave the Yoop—Uncle Larry and Anais had just moved to Toledo, and Uncle Vern had lived in Maryland since college. I hadn't been too young to remember the old house, but I had been too young to know the weight of what we'd left there. Maddie refused to talk about it. And anyway, one could still acknowledge the austerity of the new house: the functionally useless great rooms, the narrow halls, the dearth of closet space, the bonus room they only added once they realized that, without a basement, den, or playroom, there was nowhere to put any of my toys, Tommy's video games, or my father's heated recliner. And still, when we had guests, we all had to crowd around the kitchen island because no one wanted to risk spilling beer on the ten thousand-dollar Ethan Allen couch. So while my mother hurried to finish Thanksgiving dinner, she'd had to navigate around us all standing there, sucking our Budweisers, watching the Lions game on the baby TV above the wet bar.

While everyone settled into their seats, I went through the swinging door into the kitchen to fetch what remained of my beer, which I'd been milking for the past three hours. I wasn't averse to heavy drinking, but I knew the moment I went for a second drink I wouldn't hear the end of it. Never mind that my father had already drunk three Budweisers and two Manhattans, standing across the kitchen with his shirt half-tucked. My mother was mutilating the turkey, her butcher knife cracking on the cutting board. Her forehead was struck with a single vein like an extension cable run under a pink yoga mat. My father swirled the amber dregs of his Manhattan, a single maraschino cherry floating in it like a turd. He motioned for me to follow him into the living room. Before I opened my mouth, he said, "Not the night to provoke your mother."

"I'm unsure of that to which you refer," I said, like an asshole.
"She's on edge about this whole thing with your Aunt Niamh. Not that it wasn't her own stupid idea to invite her, but…" He scratched at the moss of chest hair blooming out of his shirt. "We're the only family she has left. And while I admire your mother for trying to be nice, you know, let's not mince our words here. She's going to drive her nuts."

He didn't specify which she or her. "They'll be fine," I said. "Let us pray," he sighed. "But I'm telling you, Frankie, if you have some big argument brewing in there, save it for tomorrow, okay?"

"Of course. I'm never indecorous when I argue."

"Yeah," he snorted, and together we went through the foyer into the dining room.

Aunt Niamh sat at the head of the table, in front of the window, with her back arched and legs crossed. Her outfit was hideous: a baby-pink peplum top and matching pencil skirt, with brown stockings plus the red heels. She looked like a female lawyer in a dated late-night sketch, a satire of Elle Woods. Nine months before, she finalized her divorce from my former Uncle Eric, a long, punishing process that left her briefly homeless, deluged with legal debt, and saddled with a clinical anxiety disorder for which she took a staggering cocktail of pills. They'd been together thirty-five years; she'd dropped out of college to marry him. She'd always been a bit of a hot mess, innately incapable of pulling herself together, but now we crept around her existence like a massive pile of dung in the room, pretending we didn't smell her stink. I was humiliated on her behalf, though from how she was composing herself—pouting as though stifling vomit, her hands folded in her lap—perhaps she was feeling sufficiently humiliated already. I wondered if she'd heard Uncle Vern when she arrived at the table and he whispered to my Aunt Liane, "Cue the funeral march."

I took my seat at the dining table. My siblings and cousins were in a row on the other
side—Cassie, then Maddie, then Tommy, then Anais, and then Zulie—which left me to fend for myself with the adults. I gave Tommy a quick, severe glare. He shrugged and mouthed, *Whoops*, smiling like he hadn't ruined my life. Uncle Vern had poured the remainder of his Budweiser into his wine glass; without a head, it looked like warm, dehydrated piss. When he saw my father, he announced at a holler, "29–22, Packers, Greggy boy! Put your dick away and open your wallet."

My father rolled his eyes. Uncle Vern had brought his hors d'oeuvres plate to the table, and was nibbling on a sliver of capicola from the charcuterie board. It had been my responsibility to handle the hors d'oeuvres, which I did with aplomb. I made ambitious preparations of table crackers and tortilla chips around granite mortars of homemade spinach artichoke and buffalo chicken dip; and a glass mixing bowl full of grapes, pineapple, watermelon, strawberries, and cantaloupe—which took me an hour alone to cut. But the charcuterie board was the only thing anyone wanted to touch, and once it was gone, they all started acting like starved dogs licking their bowls. Now all my hard work sat untouched and slowly spoiling on the kitchen island while my family nagged my mother for an ETA on the turkey.

"Frankie," my Aunt Liane said, from the other side of Uncle Vern, "what's up with you? How's UVA?"

"It's fine," I said, keeping it vague. "Lots of learning, lots of work."

"You still doing statistics? Or, what is it now?" She looked at Uncle Vern like he'd have a clue. "Economics? Psychology? Math?"

"I switched to history, actually."

Uncle Vern scoffed. "What's this, your fifth major now? When do you plan on graduating?"

"Quiet, Vern." She thwacked him on the chest. "She's a genius. So what, she has a thirst
for knowledge?" She laughed brassily, steadying herself on Uncle Vern's shoulder. I struggled to understand what was funny.

"And I'm only a junior, anyway," I said, smiling politely.

"No, Andrew is a junior," Uncle Vern said. Aunt Liane hit him upside the head. "Anais, Jesus. Sorry." Across the table, Anais looked up from her phone, startled by the sound of her name. "Anais, aren't you a junior?"

"Zulie and I are seniors." Anais and Zulie exchanged a side-eye, straining to contain their laughter. It had become customary in our family not to question the intricacies of Anais and Zulie's friendship, the exact contours of their joint humor. We weren't even sure how to nominalize what they were to each other—best friends? Girlfriends? Roommates? Inmates? Twin flames? All I knew was Zulie had inexplicably superseded the rule of no plus-ones at holidays, having become as much a part of our family as Anais had always been. An honorary cousin.

"What the fuck?" Uncle Vern said. "When did you two switch?"

"History is cool," Aunt Liane said, sparing him. "You learn about, like, the presidents?"

"Among other things."

"That's fun." Aunt Liane sipped her C.C. and coke. She reminded me of a girl in my high school class who used to bet she was strong enough to pick up a football player. She'd summon a crowd, crouch, wrap her arms around his thighs, and hoist him into the air. You could hear the boys whooping and cheering from the old junior high. They were flabbergasted by the anomaly of her strength, and for this, she earned boy cred. To retain this boy cred, she endured their terrible jokes and general depravity, and in exchange, she was immune to all the demeaning things they said about other girls. I saw her in Aunt Liane if only because it was the only explanation for how she could tolerate someone like Uncle Vern.
"Greg. Greeeg." Uncle Vern pointed at me from above and mouthed, History? and then, aloud, "We're okay with this?"

"I'm working on it." My father raised his hands in defense.

(Kill. Kill. Kill.)

"There's always law school, honey pie." Aunt Liane reached behind Uncle Vern to rub my shoulder, like I'd announced I had cancer. "Lots of JDs are history majors, right Cass? Cassie?"

Cassie, who'd been conversing privately with Maddie, looked up. The rosé in her wine glass went still. "What was that?"

"Cassie went on a few dates with a JD a couple years ago," Aunt Liane announced to the table, beaming. Then, only to me, she said, "A lot of them don't even practice. Although, Frankie, I mean, seriously, you'd be a killer lawyer. You'd rule the courtroom. I mean, of course, you're smart as a whip. But a lawyer has to have that certain je ne sais quoi, which you can't just learn. I really think you'd be a natural."

"Because all I do is argue?"

Aunt Liane looked wounded that I'd anticipated her punchline.

"I find it odd, Mom," Cassie said from across the table, "you mention I went out with a JD and not that I work with JDs every day."

My mother barged in through the swinging door carrying a ceramic bowl of mashed potatoes, her forehead vein now quintupled. She looked like, if anyone asked her anything about the turkey, she'd kill us all. My siblings and I had already been individually chewed out for minor misdeeds earlier that day—Maddie had criticized her trussing, Tommy had bought the wrong brand of pumpkin purée, and I was taking up too much counter space constructing my hors d'oeuvres. And even though she insisted no one help her, we'd only get in the way, she was sick
to bastard death no one was helping her, especially not her worthless fat fuck of a husband who couldn't be bothered to peel his bulging cow eyes away from the bastard game and get off his big fat bovine ass and make himself useful instead of wasting oxygen huffing and puffing about the stupid bastard Lions, that big fat stupid rotten bag of rotten meat, that rotten, rotten fuckhole.

"I had a buddy in high school named J.D.," my father said as my mother deposited the potatoes on the sideboard, fetched her wine glass off the table, and marched back to the kitchen, "who ended up getting a JD just… because." He fished the cherry out of his now empty rocks glass and ate it. "He doesn't practice either."

"That is shocking," Maddie said. Cassie smiled at her.

"Cassie's dating a surgeon now," Aunt Liane whispered to me, like a super secret bit of gossip only I—and Uncle Vern, by proximity—could be privy to. "He lives in Ocean Pines. I know. Ocean Pines. We had to drag her kicking and screaming onto the plane. She was like, It's our first holiday together. I wanna be with Roooooon!" She made Cassie sound like she'd been throwing a temper tantrum. My mother always did the same thing with me. If I defended myself, she'd shrug bashfully, Whaaaat? That's how you said iiiiit! "And I told her," Aunt Liane continued, "family comes first. That's my mantra. Family first, family first, family first, family first."

"I thought education was first?" I said.

"Family first, family first, family first," she repeated, shaking her head. "Right, Vern?" Uncle Vern nodded but seemed lost in Vernland. "Speaking of family, does anyone have eyes on Larry?"

"I do," Anais said, flicking her glass and watching the water ripple. "He's in the bathroom. He went, like… oh, wow." She stopped flicking. "He's been in there for, like, half an hour."
"Oh, that fucking prick," Uncle Vern said, gripping his napkin.

"Give him a break, Vern," Aunt Liane said. "Doesn't he have C. diff?"

"He'd better hope the fuck he doesn't," my father said. "Come into my house, stink up the shitter, probably drinking my scotch in there to uncork himself." Then, trying not to laugh prematurely, "The only thing he's gonna C. is my two diff hands coming at his face."

I made immediate eye contact with Maddie, who had to clamp her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. Zulie murmured, "Oh, wow." Everyone was looking at my father like he'd crapped himself. He took a long sip of water, his cheeks flushing.

Fortunately for him, at that moment, my mother came in with the turkey. Instead of cutting and separating the meat, she had lifted and carried the cutting board in with the turkey's golden body, half-carved, perched without fanfare in the middle. She set it on the sideboard, centered beneath the grand mirror where, sitting down, I could just barely see the crown of my head against the stark red wall.

"If he's in there with the scotch I brought, he's not coming out alive," Uncle Vern said. "Did you get a chance to drink that, Neesh? The Loch Haim?"

My mother looked at him like he'd grown a second head. "What Loch Haim?"

"Anyone? Loch Haim? Ring a bell?"

Everyone shook their heads no.

"Fantastic." He took one last swig of his beer. "That settles it. I'm twenty bucks in the hole. Fuck you all."

"Oh, Christ on a cracker," my mother said, wiping her hands on a tea towel. "You couldn't have kept him dry for another thirty minutes?"

"Anais, you said he's been in the bathroom for half an hour, right?" Aunt Liane did the
mental math. "So, that means… if he came after us… about one-thirty… so he made it two hours. Right? Who said two hours?"

The room probed their memories a moment before Cassie yelled, "Oh!" and clapped her hands. "That was me!" Everyone produced a collective groan. Cassie stood and held out her palms. "I take cash, Venmo, and checks, thank you very much, thank you very, very much."

"Vern, remind me to get my clutch after dinner. I have a twenty in there," Aunt Liane said, looking forlorn, as Uncle Vern took out his wallet.

"What is happening right now?" I asked.

Maddie cleared her throat. "They were all betting on how long Uncle Larry could go without drinking tonight. Cassie said two hours."

"You were all placing bets on Uncle Larry's sobriety?"

"Not me." She swirled her rosé. "I think it's the absolute height of stupidity."

"And before you say anything, Frankie," my mother said, "your uncle told us he quit drinking. In fact, he demanded we celebrate his not-drinking. So don't get all offended about it."

(Kill, kill, kill. Destroy.)

"I'm not getting offended." I looked around the room. Everyone eyed me like an animal they weren't yet sure was feral or not. "I just think it's cruel."

"Oh, Jesus Christ," Uncle Vern said under his breath. "Here we go."

"Uncle Larry is an alcoholic." It was true—since I could remember, he was never without a drink in his hand. On his better days, he'd go through a six-pack of Heinekens in an hour and become Funcle Larry, who gave piggyback rides and impersonated Squidward Tentacles. On worse days, he'd drink five Old Fashioneds and become Drunkle Larry, who had to be physically restrained from stripping down and leaping into the nearest body of water. Christmas the year
before, which we spent in Maryland at Uncle Vern and Aunt Liane's cottage on Newport Bay, we thought we were safe—the pool was covered for the winter, and Uncle Vern had hidden all his liquor, intelligently, in the washing machine, with the exception of a bottle of Belvedere for the rest of us to share. Well, the Belvedere went fast, and Uncle Larry had a bloodhound's nose for bourbon. The holiday ended with my father and Uncle Vern out on the dock with a fishing net, coaxing a fully nude and frostbitten Uncle Larry ashore. "You guys don't think it's, like, a really nasty thing to do? Doesn't he go to A.A?" I looked at Anais, who shrugged unhelpfully. "Obviously this is something he's self-conscious about, and you're exploiting it."

"Frankie, honey," my mother said, coming behind her chair so she was looking straight down at me, "Uncle Larry has a drinking problem, sure, but he's not an alcoholic. I'm sure you think you know what alcoholism is, but you don't. You're too young to remember your Granda Murphy, but Maddie will tell you all about him—if you showed that man Uncle Larry and called him an alcoholic, he'd laugh in your face."

I looked at Maddie, who I hoped would see how crazy our mother was acting, but instead she nodded along. "No, Frankie, you don't get it. Granda Murphy used to get drunk and pick us up and shake us like we owed him money. He dropped Tommy a few times, toward the end." I must've looked horrified, because she quickly amended, "Not on his head, Jesus. He always landed on his side, I think. Why do you think Mom can't drink Jameson's?"

My mother feigned a shudder. "I mean, God rest his soul, but seriously. And your father can attest, Pop Pop was a fan of the bottle, too. And Mimi Rena, I mean, when she was in hospice she slept every night with a fifth of whiskey like a teddy bear. Hooked up to four different machines and still, when that male nurse tried to take it away, she bit him on the hand. So don't go around saying words you don't know."
"Are you kidding me right now?" I searched the room for support, but came up with nine blank stares. "You guys are fucking evil. I cannot believe I'm related to you."

"Fuck's sake," Uncle Vern groaned, "when did Frankie turn into such a grouchy old harridan?" Then, to my mother, "I told you it'd only get worse when she went to college."

"Seriously," she said, "like, lay up, it's a holiday."

I didn't think I was a violent person, but every so often there would be moments like this when I'd feel a rage so sudden and powerful it scared me. I'd feel myself swiftly exit my body and stand across the room like a third party, watching myself become a monster, my eyes go black, my canines bare themselves. I would try to reach out and talk myself off the ledge, but I'd always fear inadvertently provoking the monster, that even the slightest motion would set her off. Sometimes, in these moments, I'd fantasize about pulling a gun on my family, not to kill them but to make them listen, to remind them I was a human, too, not some disembodied mouth floating above the dining table telling them how to live their lives, who to vote for, where not to shop, what not to eat. I'd feed off their horror and their confusion, the baby of the family holding them at gunpoint, stone-faced with a man's anger: first an anomaly, then a threat. But I didn't have a gun. Only my hands, which didn't care about confusion or anomalies, but which craved to draw blood, to reach up and wring the necks of my mother and Uncle Vern at the same time, to pound their skulls into the table over and over until their plates shattered into a million tiny crystals, all stained red and brown with their gore. Instead, I clutched the hem of the tablecloth so hard I thought I'd tear it away and bring all the dishes and glasses and vases and that ugly fucking centerpiece crashing to the floor, at which point Aunt Niamh asked, "Are we going to sit here and dogpile on Frankie or can we get some turkey already?" and I remembered not everything was about me.
While my family queued around the sideboard to plate our dinner, Tommy whispered in my ear, "I have something to tell you."

"Is it important?"

"Fairly. But I can't tell you right now."

"Oh, fuck you."

My mother was cutting the turkey to order, sectioning off bits of white meat for Cassie and Maddie, and depositing Tommy's obligatory drumstick on his plate. Uncle Vern grumbled something about Thanksgiving turning into a damn Depression breadline, and Aunt Liane scolded him, "Don't be an ingrate." I requested two slices of white meat and my mother said, "You can have one bigger slice," and then gave me a medium-at-best slice. "If you're still hungry, you can come and cut your own turkey." (Destroy, kill, destroy.) The sides were all à la carte: mashed potatoes, mushroom stuffing, maple-glazed carrots, quinoa salad, pumpkin cheesecake, and Aunt Niamh's tiramisu. Nothing looked as appetizing as it sounded. After everyone had gotten their food, my mother spooned a sad clump of salad onto her plate.

"Tommy," she said, feeling the tablecloth, "these place settings are really wonderful." She looked at me for some reason. "There's almost nothing I would've done differently." She scooched in beside me, making a point not to rattle the table like I had.

The room went quiet for a few minutes, only the scraping of silver on china and some sniffling from Aunt Niamh's end of the table. I watched her closely, waiting for a tear to fall and for her to wick it away without anyone seeing, or so she'd think. Instead, after the fourth or fifth sniffle, she reached down into her purse and withdrew an orange pill bottle. I tried to read the prescription label but I could only make out her name, Murphy, Niamh Shannon. She'd never
taken Uncle Eric's last name. She deposited one of the blue tablets into her palm and set it down beside her bread plate. At this point, all of us were staring. Then Aunt Niamh picked up her cell phone, aimed the bottom corner at the pill, and slammed it three times on the table.

"Niamh, Niamh, Niamh," my mother said, holding her wine glass steady as all the plates shook. "What are you doing?"

Aunt Niamh didn't answer. She took her water glass and held the rim to the edge of the table; then, with her butterknife, she scraped the crushed blue fragments into the glass. The particles all swirled like chemical bubbles before gathering at the bottom. We all watched her take a long, indulgent sip. When she set the glass back down, it was empty.

"That was highly unnecessary," Uncle Vern said, his mouth full of turkey.

Aunt Niamh shrugged. "It's four-thirty."

"Niamh, honey," my mother said, visibly troubled but trying to move past it, "do you want something else to drink? We have zinfandel, or I can get you some more water."

In the late afternoon sunlight, Aunt Niamh's blonde flyaways looked like tiny insect legs around her head. "Do you have," she said through a burp, "orange juice?"

My mother's face dimmed. Earlier, before my aunt had arrived, my mother cornered me by the laundry room: the orange juice, which she'd bought specifically for Aunt Niamh, had gone missing. "Thank you, Frankie," she said, fuming. "What are you yelling at me for?" I protested. "Tommy unloaded all the groceries himself. Did he put it in the garage fridge?" On the other side of the wall, the Lions scored; Uncle Vern barked, "GOD FUCKING DAMN IT." My mother shook her head. "Stop deflecting on your siblings. That orange juice was not supposed to be for anyone but your Aunt Niamh. Now she's going to think I forgot she was coming." I hissed at her rapid-fire, "I didn't drink the fucking orange juice," and stormed off into the kitchen.
"You know," my mother said now, "I don't think we have any more. I'm sorry, sweetie."

"We have cranberry juice," my father said, brightly. "You want a cosmo? We don't have any lemons. All that fruit Frankie cut, she apparently didn't think anyone would want garnishes."

(Kill, kill, kill, kill. Kill, destroy, kill, destroy.)

"No, thank you." Aunt Niamh looked morose. "I really just wanted orange juice."

"I could do a cosmo," my father said. A cosmo was the last thing he needed; his third button had come undone. Anais and Zulie exchanged a look.

"Is there something else you'd like?" Tommy asked, carefully. "I can go get it for you."

"No need," Aunt Niamh said, rising from the table. "I shouldn't bother you all."

"Niamh," my mother protested, though she didn’t follow her out. Once the swinging door stopped swinging, my mother threw her silverware onto the table. "What is her fucking problem?" She gave me a fierce glare, which made everyone stare at me, the object of blame.

"I didn't drink the orange juice," I repeated, tousling my stuffing.

"I can't, Greg," she said to my father, "I can't keep arguing with her. Not today."

(Kill her. KILL her. Kill HER.)

"That Eric character messed Niamh up good," Uncle Vern said. Everyone nodded like he'd verbalized something they'd all been dying to say. "I mean, she was always a cuckoo, but…"

"Vernon Alexander," Aunt Liane said,spanking his wrist. "That's her sister."

"No, seriously, thank you, Vern," my mother said, reaching over my plate to put her hand on his forearm. "You guys, I recognize divorce is nasty, I do. I'm not unsympathetic to her… plight. I invited her here today, after all. I mean, I figured having her host a separate Murphy family Thanksgiving—which she's never had an issue doing, for the record—well, I figured that might've been difficult for her. All this was supposed to be an olive branch for her. And look how
she repays me! She waltzes into my house moping around like fucking Eeyore, crushing drugs on my table and storming out of the room when she can't get her precious juice, like... for God's sake, what am I supposed to do with that? How do I invite her for Christmas or Easter?"

"Back in the day," Uncle Vern said, unchastened, "they used to lobotomize women like that. The psycho ones." He shrugged. "It was for the better."

Maddie chimed in, "And they used to castrate men who cheated on their wives."

"I don't think," Cassie said, "anyone should be lobotomized or castrated."

"Cassie, isn't your boyfriend married with kids?" Anais said, sipping her water. Cassie's face rouged over. "Ron's wife is in rehab. That doesn't count."

I looked at Uncle Vern and Aunt Liane, who continued to spear carrots on their forks, unfazed by this information. I realized then Maddie was right: I didn't have all the context. Everyone had been in this family longer than I had. There were no secrets at this table, except, of course, mine—torturing me now, braising the lining of my stomach. There was always going to be a secret, a violent shame; it was my birthright. My family had been watching me for years, waiting for me to puke it out in front of them, for my particular strain of turpitude to incarnate the same way it had for them, over the years, one by one by one.

"Psycho or not," Uncle Vern said, masticating his turkey with his mouth open, "I absolutely cannot stand that little baby voice she has."

"The baby voice," my father echoed. "God, Vern, it drives me up the fucking wall. She talks like a goddamn Teletubby." Anais and Zulie laughed at this.

"And don't get me started on her clothes." Uncle Vern dropped his utensils. "I mean, does the baby who voices her dress her too? She looks like one of Cassie's old American Girl dolls."

"Oh, Vern," my mother said, "you know that's just how she is. Who here remembers our
wedding? The way she strutted into the church in those awful green corduroys… I mean, I love my sister to death, but it's like dress code is a foreign concept to her." She gestured to me with her fork. "I had to convince your Grandma Murphy not to have her kicked out."

Everyone at the table was invested now, even the cousins, corroborating each insult with another example, turning every misstep, Freudian slip, sleight of hand, Irish goodbye into a composite referendum on Aunt Niamh's personality, her loss of sanity, her lack of it to begin with. Every time she wore the wrong thing, or took the wrong tone, or drank the wrong drink—all of it was fodder for them. I drained the rest of my Budweiser, then my water glass. My food looked rotten on my plate, matte and opaque; the mashed potatoes were shaded with a waxy crust. I eyed the swinging door nervously: Aunt Niamh was presumably just on the other side, well within earshot, hearing all the cruel, awful things my family was saying. I remained silent. Of course, it occurred to me to defend my aunt, who had done no evil as far as anyone knew, whose only crime was being exceedingly strange. But I couldn't find anything to say.

"Maddie," my mother said, through a teary laugh, "can you go make sure your aunt hasn't gotten lost in there? And bring the rest of the wine bottles in here, if you would."

Maddie rose obediently. "Does anyone want anything else to drink?"

Uncle Vern requested another Budweiser, and another C.C. and coke for Aunt Liane. My father asked if Maddie could make him another Manhattan—"A real one, please"—and Maddie rolled her eyes and said, "I'm cutting you off." Finally, she caught my eye. "Frankie, would you please help me with the wine bottles?"

I cleared my throat. "Can't Tommy do it?"

"Tommy's going to help, too."

"So you, Aunt Niamh, and Tommy aren't enough?"
My mother flicked me on the forearm. "Don't be obstinate."

"I'm not being obstinate. She doesn't need my help."

"You are being obstinate," she said, slowly like she was taming me, "so if you'd like to be helpful and not lazy, why don't you stand up and go with your brother and sister?" At a whisper, "It might even be good for you to walk off all those potatoes you've been hooovering."

"Yeah, Frankie," Maddie said. "Stop being obstinate."

I scoffed at her. "Go help yourself, bitch, I'm not your fucking slave."

My mother spun in her chair so fast I thought she'd fly right off and bring my father down with her. "Don't you dare speak to your sister that way. Go, now. Help her."

"Jesus, Frankie." My father shook his head. "Always something up with you."

I stood up and threw my napkin at the centerpiece; it made a sharp rustling noise, like a bird falling out of a tree. Everyone was glaring at me, personally insulted, and I didn't blame them. There was something up with me, and I, too, couldn't understand exactly what it was. As I passed behind Uncle Vern, I heard him say, sotto voce, "She on the rag or something?"

(Kill kill kill kill kill. Kill, destroy, kill, destroy. Destroy kill destroy. Bomb them, bomb them, bomb them all. Bomb them, burn them, gun them down. Raze to dirt and blood and sinew and pulp and meat and flesh and hair and brain matter. Kill kill kill. Annihilate.)

I followed Maddie and Tommy into the kitchen. Aunt Niamh was nowhere to be seen. I began bundling the various half-drunk wine bottles in my arms, extraordinarily annoyed that it was obviously only a one-man job. It wasn't until I'd gotten all of them that I noticed Maddie and Tommy were still there, not looking for Aunt Niamh nor making any drinks, but standing still on the other side of the island, watching me gravely. Maddie was holding my phone.

"Oh, shit," I said, laughing a little. "Where did you find that?"
"It's been sitting on the counter since before dinner," Maddie said, staring at the screen. "What's your password?"

"I'm not telling you."

"Okay." She didn't put the phone down. "I don't really need it. You have notification previews on." Tommy was staring at his feet. Maddie showed me my screen, presenting it with both hands like a bottle of champagne. She used her index finger to scroll through all my notifications before finding what she was looking for: an email from a name I didn't recognize, with the subject line: "[URGENT] Notification of Termination of Scholarship." She pressed and held her finger down on the notification, and a preview of the email's first paragraph appeared, which she read aloud: "Dear Frances, I hope this message finds you well. I am writing to inform you of a significant update regarding your scholarship status. Regrettably, we must notify you your status as a University of Virginia Jefferson Scholar has been terminated effective November 23rd, 2023—"

"Shut up, shut up, Maddie. Jesus." I looked straight at Tommy, blood pooling behind my eyes. "You fucking tattletale. You told her." He wouldn't meet my eye.

"You're flunking out of college." Maddie crossed her arms. It wasn't a question.

"Oh my God, I'm not flunking out, come on." But I was lying. I was flunking out of college. Without even reading the rest of the email, I could've told them exactly what it said: now that I'd been dropped from so many classes, I'd gone below the minimum twelve credit hours stipulated by my scholarship. Geoff had probably snitched to financial aid about my grades in my other classes. Effectively, I was done for. I probably wasn't eligible for an appeal, but even if I was, I didn't think I'd be able to muster the energy. The truth was: I did not enjoy college. I'd done well enough my first two years, but by the start of my junior year, something had broken
inside me. I couldn't make myself care anymore. When I went to class, I sat in the back, drew elaborate doodles of birds and tulips and weeping willows in my notebook, bought shoes and jeans and crystals and romance novels about fairies and werewolves with my father's credit card, typed out song lyrics when we were meant to be taking notes, and nodded every so often when I sensed the professor was saying something salient and meaningful. Then I stopped coming altogether. I spent my days at home, drifting from one headache to another, pathologically working through my Netflix watchlist, wearing my bedsheets around my dark apartment like a bridal train. And I fantasized about returning to class one day, standing in the middle of the Socratic circle, and screaming at the top of my lungs, throwing myself down onto the linoleum and beating my limbs until campus security came to take me away—because it hurt so bad, tore me apart inside, that this was what college really was, that this was what I'd worked so hard for, that I was barely scraping by during what was supposed to be the pinnacle of my life.

But I couldn't explain any of this to them. Maddie had gone to Bowdoin for graphic design and accrued an insane amount of debt; Tommy had learned from her mistake and gone to EMU for electrical engineering. They were not unsuccessful in their respective paths. But I was the smart one. I was the one who'd earned perfect grades, who'd gone to MAMUN as a freshman, who'd taken the tennis team to regionals, who'd won an award for my Common App essay. I'd gotten a full ride to UVA, for fuck's sake, and I'd wasted it. My siblings watched me from across the island: there was fury in their eyes. Every opportunity that had passed them by and landed in my hands, I'd thrown away. They would not hear my defense. They did not care.

"How are you going to fix this?" Maddie asked, sternly.

"I don't know."

Her face became our mother's. "Look at me when I'm talking to you."
I stared at the outlet on the side of the island, its mutely shocked expression.

"Frankie. Look at me."

I refused to oblige. Maddie marched forward and grabbed my wrist. I leaned in and bit her hand, hard, like a rabid dog. She yelped and pulled her fist to her mouth. Her eyes filled with tears. With her other hand, she slapped me squarely across the face. "Hey!" Tommy shouted, suddenly unfrozen from his post, rushing at me from the other side. They cornered me in front of the oven. Without thinking, I grabbed the bottle of Meiomi beside me and hurled it down onto the floor. The sound of it smashing was long and sonorous like a car crash. Maddie clasped her hands over her mouth, two red dots on her middle finger where I'd bitten her. Tommy went ashen. The wine had spattered like blood all over the side of the island, the oven door, my shins and my shoes; bits of glass had scattered all the way to the swinging door, beneath it into the dining room, where everyone could see. Not like they wouldn't have heard it first.

I was moored to my place, completely catatonic save for the slight tremble of my arms and the sense my head was visibly throbbing like the blue, translucent skull of a newborn baby. Maddie moved first, sidestepping me and my mess, to peer through the door. Go ahead, I thought, waving my white flag, show them all what I did. Show them what you made me do. But then Maddie pulled her head back in, looking perplexed. "There's no one there."

"What?" Tommy came beside her. "Where are they?"

"I don't know."

"How long have they been gone?"

"Tommy, I know exactly as much as you do." She opened the door and motioned for me to follow them into the dining room.

Indeed, the table had been evacuated. Everyone's food remained half-eaten on their
plates; the wine glasses were bone dry, which filled me with guilt. I'd failed yet another thing my family had asked me to do. Tommy checked under the table like they might've been hiding from us, trying to pull a fast one. "Maybe they thought you set off a bomb," he said. I didn't laugh or smile. Maddie was in the foyer, calling out names. "Mom? Dad? Cass? Uncle Vern? Aunt Liane? Anais? Zulie?" Her voice echoed along the high ceiling, the wrought iron chandelier swaying ever so slightly. She didn't call for Aunt Niamh.

Suddenly, the front door opened. It was our mother, out of breath, her white shoes stained with dry mud. "Uncle Larry's missing."

"Missing?" we echoed in unison.

"We can't find him anywhere. He wasn't in the bathroom, or the living room, or any of the bedrooms. We don't know where he is." Without awaiting our input, she returned outside and shut the door behind her. We could hear her calling, "Larry! Larry!" and I wondered if the neighbors would think we were searching for a pet bird.

"Where is everyone else?" Maddie asked, marching into the living room. Tommy followed after her. I watched them split up, Maddie heading out to the backyard, Tommy through the garage. Instead of following either of them, I began climbing the curved staircase, feeling more exhausted with each step. As far as I was concerned, Thanksgiving was over. The sun was setting, the whole house bright and sad. Even if they found Uncle Larry before nightfall, the food was cold now, and my mother was eventually going to find her pinot noir smashed all over the kitchen floor and that meltdown would last at least an hour, and at some point—maybe not today, but very soon—my family would learn what had become of me and my education, how I'd disappointed them in the one way they had always been so sure I could've never disappointed them.
As I passed the door to the bonus room, I glimpsed something that made my heart skip a beat: the orange juice, upright on the coffee table with the cap on, completely empty. Beside it, a handle of my father's 1800 Reposado. *Anais and Zulie*—I knew instantly. *Them and their fucking tequila screwdrivers.* But I wasn't angry; I didn't have the capacity for it anymore. If anything, I was envious—they'd had the privilege of sneaking away from our family. They had no obligations, nothing to prove. I would've done the same thing.

I opened my bedroom door. The light was already on, the fan spinning. Aunt Niamh was sitting on the edge of my bed, holding one of my tennis trophies. Or perhaps it was Science Olympiad. Model UN? They all looked the same when you'd been away for so long, artifacts of a person once worth celebrating but who you no longer were. When I entered, she looked up. Her eyes were glossy, though she didn't seem sad. I didn't yet know what to make of finding her here. For some reason, it struck me as obvious, ordinary—as though this were her own room and I was the stranger inside it.

I sat beside her on the bed. "Were you also looking for Uncle Larry?" I asked.

She looked confused. "Who?"

"Never mind."

She studied the trophy, my full name engraved on the marble plate: *Frances Olivia Mulder.* Upon closer inspection, it was indeed a tennis trophy—states, my sophomore year. We sat there in silence for a while, watching the fan blades turn on the ceiling, their shadows lagging behind. My childhood bedroom had become a suffocating place since I'd moved to Charlottesville. It wasn't just the trophies, or the books, or the décor, or the corona of Polaroids around my vanity mirror—all those individual tragedies, totems of the thousand versions of myself that had lived in this room. I had learned to deal with the fact that I would never be young
again, that I would never be able to hold my future in my hand like a lump of clay, infinitely malleable though quickly ossifying. I had learned to accept the various ways I'd ruined my own life. But somewhere within me, there was a little girl who lived in a rippled bubble of optimism, who was still naïve and blindly hopeful, who was so sure of everything, who had been told her entire life she was smart and had taken this to mean she could never make the wrong choice. This was her room, not mine. Not anymore.

I held my aunt's wrist; she continued toying with the trophy. "You don't deserve to have these people as your family, Aunt Niamh. You deserve to be loved."

She shrugged but didn't say anything.

"I mean it. They are awful, awful people."

"Okay," she said, softly though without any sadness.

Outside my window, there was some commotion, voices hollering. I went to investigate; Aunt Niamh remained where she was, holding my trophy and staring at the wall.

It was almost night, the cypress trees along the fence blanched in the floodlights. There was the faintest shimmer of flurries like white noise against the sky. I scanned the yard for the source of the yelling. The pool had been uncovered, a glowing brown bean on the pavement, the tarp folded over the fence. There were ripples around a long, green raft floating in the deep end. It was Uncle Larry. He was lying with his hands folded over his stomach, peacefully asleep, wearing only his underwear. Anais and Zulie were kneeling at the poolside, trying to wrangle him in. Each time he was close enough, the girls tried but could not pull the raft all the way out; it didn't help that every time they touched him he thrashed like a fish, splashing the filthy water all over them. The rest of my family was gathered in a half moon behind the girls, shivering in the freezing cold.
"Frankie," Aunt Niamh said, startling me, "is it true you're failing out of UVA?"

I turned to her, my heart racing. She stayed facing the wall. "What?" I said.

"That's what I thought."

I recalled forcing Tommy to answer the door, his five-minute conversation with Aunt Niamh on the porch. How he must've been dying to tell someone my secret, even her. But it didn't matter now. It was not my prerogative to blame Tommy for the disgrace I'd brought upon my family. It was not his fault I'd done what I'd done. I watched Anais and Zulie in the backyard, reaching across the pool's surface, bracing themselves against each other. I imagined if I ignored Aunt Niamh for long enough, she would disappear, without fanfare, into a small dune of skin cells on my bed—one less witness to my annihilation.

But then she said something that chilled me: "I figured you wouldn't enjoy college either. I also had perfect grades in high school, you know."

Anais and Zulie dove headfirst into the water, one after the other. They surfaced from the curdled varnish of foam and leaves, gagging and rubbing their eyes, and dragged Uncle Larry to the shallow end. They heaved him up onto dry land, the pavement darkening around him, where he laid still as a corpse. After a long minute, he finally sat up, groggy and irritated to have been disturbed. The girls were yelling, but I could tell they were relieved to have saved him. Uncle Vern and Aunt Liane helped them out of the water; my parents fetched a stack of beach towels from the chest on the patio; and my siblings and Cassie helped shroud them around Anais, Zulie, and Uncle Larry. From my bedroom, alone with Aunt Niamh, I watched them all move as one hunched, many-limbed creature across the frosted backyard, back into warmth.
THERE'S NOTHING LEFT FOR YOU

It was a neon August day when I was admitted to PACEDs, but now there's snow accumulating on the sunroof of Phoebe's ancient Saab, and we have plans for the first time since I've been home. For the occasion, she's wearing a cable-knit Cindy-Lou Who sweater and baggy jeans with gashes at the knees. The radio is playing Taylor Swift's "Christmas Tree Farm," and Phoebe keeps lowering the volume every time she makes a turn, jerking her head back and forth. Her nervous driving used to always make me motion sick, especially when she'd fumble the clutch and make the car heave, but it seems she's improved over the past four months. Or maybe I just don't get motion sick so much anymore. A plastic Target bag wilts over my feet, containing a greeting card, a scented candle, and a rubbery purple apparatus—some kind of extravagant teething ring, or a dildo maybe. This is when I begin to grasp the lunacy of what we're doing.

"A baby shower?" I asked, earlier today when Phoebe called to pass along the invitation. She knew I had no plans for the evening, or for any subsequent evenings for that matter, so there was no getting out of it. "Who do we know that's having a baby?"

"It's for Eileen. And it's not for a baby, she adopted a cat."

"A cat? This is a baby shower for a cat?"

"Okay, so you are keeping up, good. Anyway, the whole store is invited. I don't know if any of them are actually going to come, but they are invited. And Eileen says we can just come
whenever 'cause Conan's already there and they can let us in, but she won't be back until just after five, so I'm thinking I'll pick you up at five-fifteen, and we'll show up at five-thirty so we're not the only ones there."

"'We' being you and me?"

"No, me and Chester." Chester is the name of the rat that lives behind Phoebe's living room wall. I imagined him scrabbling back at her in accord. "Obviously I mean us."

"And I'm invited?"

"Of course you are."

"And the whole store is invited? Like..." I lowered my voice, even though there was no one around to hear me. "Like, Allison too?"

"Okay, the whole store except Allison." Before I left, Allison was a shift lead at the drive-thru coffee kiosk where Phoebe and I have worked since high school. We found out she'd been promoted to store manager the same day my blood pressure bottomed out halfway through pulling a long black and I woke up three hours later with a saline drip in my arm. I'd hoped I would come home from PACEDs and she would've been unceremoniously demoted, or even fired, for some petty offense like forgetting to submit a milk count, or accidentally overscheduling the one minor at our location. But, to my chagrin, she's still there, and the minor is no longer a minor anyway. "But I don't think she'd come regardless. I think she knows everyone hates her by now."

"Am I supposed to bring something?" I asked.

At the time, Phoebe said no, no one was expecting any gifts from me, but now that I'm in her car on the way to Eileen and Conan's apartment, I wish I got something. Even just a dinky little toy or a pouch of treats, to prove I'm not just showing up because I have nothing better to
do, and that I am still attuned to the rules and conventions of society. Since coming home, I've felt like an alien, transplanted from another world to live among humans and replicate their behaviors. I've had a hard time convincing myself this is my real life. None of it feels familiar to me at all.

"Did my phone just buzz?" Phoebe asks, plunging her hand into the compartment beneath the radio. She deposits her phone on my left thigh. "Could you read what it says?"

The time is 5:24. Her wallpaper, which used to be a picture of her and her father on a kayak by Turnip Rock, is now a stock image of a snowy forest. The newest notification is a text from Eileen: sooo allison might be coming.... As I read it aloud, another text appears: but jack is coming too so it evens out i think!!! My heartbeat quickens.

"Okay, what the fuck," Phoebe says, and then sighs. "Well. That's fine, I guess."

"Do you want to just ditch?"

"No, I mean... we could, I guess." She puffs her cheeks and releases a thin stream of breath, like an oil diffuser. "No, you know what, let's just go. Everyone was so excited you were coming home, and I really wanted us to do something instead of just driving around. I think you deserve to be around normal people again. And we can bully Allison together."

Her pitch is persuasive enough that I don't resist. She maneuvers the car through the narrow entry into the parking lot of Eileen and Conan's apartment complex. The building is a squat, gray box with absolutely no personality. There are three floors wedged into the space of two, the windows of the top floor tucked under the eaves, and the ones on the bottom floor peering out from beneath the snow. Their apartment is on the second floor, at the end of a long, foul-smelling corridor with wrinkles in the carpeting.

"Just remember," Phoebe says as we approach the door, "you don't owe anyone an
explanation for where you were. Especially not fucking Allison, 'kay?"

"Okay," I say, hoping she'll drop the subject.

When we knock, Eileen opens the door almost immediately.

"Oh my gosh, hel-lo!" she says, lingering on the last vowel. She steps forward to give me a hug. She's wearing an inside-out black shirt, which reeks of burnt espresso and peppermint. Clumps of her cropped blonde hair are gluey with syrup. "Sorry I'm so nasty right now. We literally missed you so much, it's not even funny. Ugh, I'm so happy you're here."

Eileen and Conan's apartment is spacious but old, popcorn ceilings and shag carpet. They've put a lot more effort into this baby shower than I expected. The back wall of the living room is covered completely in coiling gold ribbons and a complicated network of string lights, and in the middle they've tacked up a stock banner, *BRINGING UP BABY!!!!!* The coffee table is cluttered with an assortment of chips and candy, a two-liter of Dr. Pepper, two bouquets of balloons with cat-shaped tinfoil weights, and some actual garbage no one has bothered to clean up. Eileen motions for Phoebe and me to sit wherever.

Jack is already here, occupying the right end of the three-seater sofa under the window. He's wearing his "signature outfit," the outfit he's always wearing when I imagine him, like he's a cartoon character: long cargo pants cuffed up around the tops of his dirty Doc Martens, a *Bury Me At Makeout Creek* t-shirt, and a pair of cubic zirconia earrings. Since August, he's grown a mustache. Allison is also here, sitting criss-cross-applesauce in the center of the loveseat, leaving me no choice but to opt for the sofa. I feel my heartbeat quicken again at the thought of having to sit next to Jack, but Phoebe graciously takes the middle seat so I can take the left. When I sit, the cushion sinks all the way down to the undercarriage.

"Conan, where's the baby?" Eileen asks, ducking her head to check under the furniture.
Conan, curled up in a flaccid beanbag chair in the back corner of the room, shrugs indifferently. Their cat, Juicy, sits snugly in their lap. They stroke his back in a syncopated rhythm, one hand after the other. "She should be in your room. She was misbehaving so I put her in timeout."

"Misbehaving?" Eileen makes a face. "What did she do?"

"She knocked over all my pasta jars. On purpose. There was rigatoni everywhere. I had to sweep it up and she just stared at me with her cruel little eyes the whole time."

"Oh, Lord. Okay. I'm gonna go shower." Eileen disappears into the back hallway.

Conan reaches for a short stack of papers on the coffee table. Juicy leaps out of their lap, expresses his butthole for the room, and struts off to the kitchen. Conan slides the top two sheets across the table toward Phoebe and me. "It's just a silly thing Eileen came up with. It's not that serious."

I retrieve one of the sheets. It's a trivia quiz about the new kitten, titled How Well Do You Know the Baby? in large, rainbow bubble letters at the top of the page. The questions are low-stakes: "What is the baby's favorite food," "What was the baby's name before she was adopted," "Who is the baby's favorite BLACKPINK member," and so on. At the bottom, there's a prompt for name suggestions. Despite Conan's assurance it's not that serious, I'm embarrassed I don't know how to answer anything. After five minutes trying to surmise a response to the first question, one that may not necessarily be correct but is a good enough guess I don't seem like a complete outcast, I scribble Purina and move on. I look over at Phoebe's paper. She's written Lexapro.

"Done," Allison exclaims, slapping her paper onto the coffee table as though it were one of those timed multiplication quizzes from elementary school. She's wearing Minnie Mouse
pajama pants, a curious choice even for her, and is groping the gap between the cushions with her bare toes. Her face is contorted into a pathetic smirk. In some ways, I feel awful for her. Conan takes the paper and starts a pile down by their feet.

"So," Allison says. "What's been going on with you?"

"Me?" I say, knowing well there's no one else here she would say that to.

"Yes, you, silly. Where have you been the past couple months? You just up and disappeared for a little bit there. I thought you might've died or something."

"I'm also done," Phoebe says. She tries to jettison her paper across the room to Conan, but it catches over the coffee table and floats back to her feet. Instead of picking it up, she turns to me. "Are you done yet?"

"Almost," I lie. I haven't gotten past the second question.

"I'm definitely looking to get you rehired so you can start back ASAP," Allison continues, disregarding the interruption. "I mean, you were definitely one of our stronger baristas when you left, so there shouldn't be too much hubbub about it. I did always wonder why you just up and vanished on us. And right before fall launch, too. We could've used you!" She makes a guttural, mammalian noise that could, I suppose, pass for laughter. "Didn't we run, like, a four-grand peak, Conan?" Conan shrugs. It doesn't shock me Allison doesn't remember.

"I passed out halfway through my shift," I say. "They called an ambulance."

Phoebe grips my wrist, her fingers wrapping all the way around and meeting at my pulse.

Allison goes white. "I remember that day. It was after I left. Someone told me a customer OD'd in the drive-thru. Who told me that?"

"No, it was me. I just fainted. I'm fine now."

"You went to the hospital?" Allison scans the room for confirmation. "I didn't even
realize. Wow. Jeez Louise. I'm sorry. What happened? Was it low blood sugar or something?"

Phoebe says, quickly, "That's really none of your business, Allison."

"I mean," I say, "everyone might as well know."

I look around the room. Everyone is still and unreadable. I can't see Jack clearly from here, and I don't dare turn to look, but I can picture his exact expression, the way his brow must be furrowing, neat, relaxed. This isn't what I wanted. This is nothing like how I imagined it.

"Well, technically," I continue, "I was only at the hospital for a few days, and then I went to this place up in Michigan called PACEDs. That's P-A-C-E-D-lowercase-s. It's, um... it's a residential treatment facility. I don't really think I need to get into it, but— well, I mean, I've already started talking, haven't I? That's the Petoskey Area Center for... well... okay. All right. You might as well know."

*     *     *

At six, Eileen emerges from the bathroom, now in a UT Rockets hoodie and sweatpants, to let Anais and Zulie in. She's done a terrible job of drying herself, and leaves a damp footpath in the carpet. When she opens the door, she greets them exactly the same way she greeted Phoebe and me earlier, lingering on the vowels and everything. Message received.

It took all of thirty seconds for my grand reveal to lose its intrigue. An uncomfortable stare from Conan, a murmured "damn" from Jack; Phoebe became very still and quiet, her grip on my wrist ossifying as though she were going through rigor mortis. Then Allison started prattling on about the rehire process and everyone forgot I'd said anything. They didn't care after all. For a moment, I wanted to tell them again, but slower this time, and then maybe add some gruesome detail—something about the Purge Closet, or the taped-off mirrors, or zeroing out—so they could really get the picture. Oh, how awful, someone would say, clutching their hand to their
heart. *Jesus, you poor thing.* Someone else would say, *I mean, I thought you looked frail, but I didn't want to say anything.* Allison would say, *Take your time reacclimating, sweetheart. You deserve it, after what you've been through.* Instead, I kept my mouth shut. If I'm not going to get the reaction I want, I might as well not degrade myself by begging for it. Evidently, Allison feels no shame about anything she's done, and has spent the past fifteen minutes talking, uninterrupted, about herself and her boyfriend's daughter.

"The other day, I'm telling you, Brindley comes back from school, drops her bag, and immediately goes, in the sweetest little voice, 'Mom? Dad? Isn't socialism just, like, watered-down communism? How do Gen. Z leftists live with themselves, knowing they're basically supporting the same regime that gave us the Soviet Union?' And she *just* turned ten, too! That girl, I swear, *she's* going places!"

I whisper into Phoebe's ear, "'Brindley?'"

Phoebe whispers back, "'Mom?'"

Anais and Zulie arrive holding a pair of cold brews, the ice still intact, and three swollen plastic bags full of goodies. They motion for Phoebe and me to scooch closer to Jack so they can squeeze in on the left end of the sofa, which seems impractical until I consider the only other options are the floor or the loveseat with Allison. Even with Phoebe between us, my proximity to Jack makes me shiver. I can smell, for the first time, his cologne: sandalwood, maybe cedar too—a fatherly scent. Eileen hands Zulie two quizzes and flees into the kitchen.

"Phoebe, look at what we got Eileen," Anais says, opening one of the bags. It's packed with a hodgepodge of cat toys, vector-art stickers, snacks (human and feline), a plastic-wrapped three-piece set of mason jars, and a couple of crumpled receipts. Anais takes out what looks to be a two-by-four but then turns it around to reveal it has a design: a clip-art kitten etched by
machine into the faux-wood particleboard, and an inscription, You Had Me At 'Meow'. Tastefully ironic. "This, I found on clearance at Home Goods. I'm not sure yet if Eileen will like it."

"Are you joking?" Phoebe says, leaning over me to get a closer look. She scratches at the kitten's face as though it were real. "It's literally so perfect. There was something like that at Target that I was about to get, but I was already over budget. I have to be, like, really stingy these next few weeks so I can make rent."

Zulie leans over Anais to whisper to Phoebe, "You wouldn't have to be stingy if She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named would learn how to schedule people."

"No, genuinely," Phoebe mutters. "I was scheduled twelve hours this week. Like, seriously? Twelve. And three of them are during my geology final that I requested off for, like, three months ago."

"I literally got five hours last week," Anais says. "Five. I'm supposed to be full time, too. I have open availability. I don't get what the problem is. But then the people who call off every other shift get thirty-two? It's such bullshit. She might as well write the schedule blind."

I look over. Allison has flopped over onto her side so she can talk to Conan, and from what I can gather, she's either telling the exact same story from earlier, or one that's far too similar to be noteworthy. I don't think I've ever seen someone have so much to say in my entire life. I imagine the lengths it would take for me to talk that much about myself, and to be safe in the assumption that whoever is listening will handle my words with care. I'd have to be on my deathbed, surrounded by loved ones, waiting for the EKG monitor to pronounce me gone. That's the only time you can really say anything and everyone else will listen no matter what, because soon you'll never say anything ever again, and they're trying to capture that single, suspenseful moment when you finally finish the story you've been telling all your life.
"No, wait, didn't the old manager do that to you?"

"What?" I say. Zulie is pointing to me.

"Right before you quit… what was his name? Oh my God, it's right on the tip of my tongue… Chris! He randomly cut all your hours, right?"

Anais, Zulie, and Phoebe are now all staring directly at me, awaiting my affirmation. I'm unsure how to respond with the truth, which is, yes, Chris did cut all my hours, and yes, I did technically quit, but no, the first thing did not cause the second, and no, they aren't really even related at all. But this is beside the point, so I nod slowly.

"Yeah, no, he was firing you without firing you. He cut your hours so you'd have to quit."

"That's so fucked-up," Anais says, shaking her head. "And now look at Allison, doing the same exact thing. What a fucking bootlicker."

"I mean, that's not why I quit."

Anais gives me a confused look. "What?"

"Oh, you missed it. I was telling everyone about it earlier. I was actually, um… I was at a treatment facility up in Petoskey."

"Like a psych ward?"

"Huh? No, it's a— it's for eating disorders."

"You have an eating disorder?" Zulie blurts, suddenly at a normal volume instead of the sotto we've been conversing at. Then, at a whisper again: "Shit. My bad."

"Well. It's not like it's a secret anymore."

"What kind?" Anais asks. "Sorry, is that rude to ask? I'm sorry. Like, bulimia?"

Her assumption of bulimia over anorexia is like a mortal wound. "Sure. Like bulimia."

"Is that why you fainted at work that one day?" Anais turns and says to Zulie, "You
weren't there. There was, like, an ambulance outside and everything."

"Anyway," I say, not answering her, "the hours thing didn't end up mattering that much. I had to quit anyway, 'cause… well, for obvious reasons."

Anais and Zulie go quiet, leaning into each other as though to physically distance themselves from me. It occurs to me that perhaps this alien feeling I've harbored since coming back from PACEDs must be beginning to manifest on the outside, that other people must not recognize me as the same person either. My words keep coming out wrong, my demeanor off-kilter. I feel so unlike myself I might as well be a complete stranger, sitting in this room full of people who are sure they remember me from somewhere, but just can't place it.

"Anais," Conan calls from the other side of the room, "come show me what you got." Anais and Zulie split apart and bring them the bag, presenting it like a sack of Halloween candy. Juicy reappears, sensing treats, and probes the bag's lumpy bottom with his snout.

Phoebe motions for me to scoot over to the now vacant side of the sofa. "What was that?" she asks, scooting after me. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine."

"That stuff from earlier was really intense. Are you sure you're fine?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. I just…" I lose the end of the sentence, feel it scurry back down my throat like a spooked animal. Phoebe pulls her legs up so her feet are curled over the edge of the sofa, her head craning back against the window.

"If you want to leave, I'm totally cool with going. If you want."

"No, that's not it. I don't want to leave." I breathe in and out. "I just don't think I belong here. I feel like no one really cares that I'm here."

"Are you kidding? Everyone was practically begging me to bring you. It's not like it's a
pity invite, definitely not. No one here pities you."

Without even meaning to, I say, "I kind of wish they did."

Phoebe lifts her head from the window, the most incredible expression just beginning to form on her face as Eileen appears in front of me with a plastic serving tray, smiling brightly.

"Cupcake?"

* * *

I never went home between shifts. This was intentional. The coffee kiosk shares a parking lot with a Mexican restaurant, and I always parked as close to the patio as possible. There were always people dining outside, gabbing noisily, gnawing on tacos with the tips of their teeth. I'd kill the interim hours in my car, knowing I'd never feel the desire to eat if I knew these people could be watching me. My other job was just down the road: Kobe Kitchen, a Japanese steakhouse with hibachi tables that periodically burst into flames and made all the guests ooh and aah, which made me hate them. We had bussers, so I rarely had to look at or touch food when I was hosting, unless someone walked past with a takeout container and I'd catch a glimpse of a half-masticated spider roll or a sweaty pile of grilled vegetables, which always looked supremely disgusting beneath the containers' foggy lids. I would be lying if I said I wasn't always thinking about food, and how to avoid having to think about it. Having the two jobs was convenient in that sense. I'd go to the kiosk early—five, six, seven in the morning—and enter a delirium that allowed me to turn my brain off, to think of nothing but the cup in my hand, the buttons on the POS, the voices on the headset. The vocabulary of each morning—Reset the play. Behind. What can I get started for you? Cut light and bold. Behind. I need fives in drawer two. I need two chocolate muffins on the fly. What are our drive-thru times at? Behind—disfigured into a language I could not remember learning despite knowing by heart. Then I'd be at Kobe Kitchen
until nine, ten, eleven at night; and switch tongues just like that—Corner. For two? For four? You can follow me this way. Corner. Would we like a booth or hibachi? Fourteen's clear. Are we celebrating anything special tonight? What's a good phone number? Corner. I'd come home to my empty apartment, to my empty fridge, too tired to eat anyway although my mouth curled around the shapes of imaginary meals and my stomach crawled up my throat like a cave diver scouring for the light. I tell people this is how it got so bad—I just couldn't budget the money or time to eat—but I know the truth. I'll always remember that terrible summer fondly, how those soupy, delirious days all smudged together at the seams. For once in my life, I had control. I wanted so much then. I wanted to be formless. I wanted to be brittle. I wanted to be a specter that existed only in peripheries and the backs of minds, who disappeared when looked at directly. I wanted to be pruned down to muscle and bone, my extraneous pieces picked off and discarded, until there was nothing left. I wanted to be the background of a fading photograph, the blurry figure in the corner of every eye, the face on the billboard you drive past every day but never really look at. And, most of all, I wanted someone to reach their hands into my wrecked life and find me, small, crushed, and try so hard to pull me out, to pull so hard their muscles snapped like guitar strings, and I wanted them to fail. I wanted to be found and failed and mourned, in that order. I wanted the whole world kneeling.

*   *   *

"So when are you coming back?"

I turn to my left. The movement feels foreign to me. Phoebe has migrated to the floor with Anais and Zulie, the three of them hunched over the opposite side of the coffee table, filling out their quizzes. Only Jack and I are left on the sofa. He glances at my cupcake, which I've disemboweled and scattered around the paper plate in an attempt to make it look eaten. I couldn't
bring myself to decline Eileen's offer, so I resolved to just suck it up and eat it like a normal person. So far, I have not succeeded. Jack hasn't said anything about it.

"I'm actually not even rehired yet, so I don't really know."

"Oh, right, right," he says, nodding. "I thought I heard Allison say something like that, but to be honest, I was straight-up tuning that bitch out."

I let out a nervous laugh.

"Isa was like that. She'd just, you know, *blah blah blah blah blah blahblah*, on and on for-fucking-ever. I swear, she could talk her way out of a hostage situation. They wouldn't even have to negotiate, and then, you know what, they'd hire her on the spot. 'Cause having to listen to her blather on was just... I mean, it was borderline abusive."

Of all the things I can't remember from before PACEDs, I recall Jack's ex-girlfriend with astonishing clarity. She had a face built for laughter, with smooth features Phoebe described as "buttery," and a loud, squeaky voice. Eileen used to say she'd make a good grandmother, which I'm not sure I would've taken as a compliment, but Isa did anyway. She never struck me as particularly talkative, though Jack would know better after all.

"Anyways," Jack says, spreading his legs so our knees are practically touching. He's now almost as close as I was to Phoebe when there were five people crammed together on one sofa. Our forearms brush against each other, his tanned and soft with fine hairs, mine bald and coarse. "I think I'm done with those kinds of people. The really *yap yap yappy* ones. I need something new. Like, *really* new. Something—I don't know—something *insane*. You know?"

I pretend not to know. He's looking right at me, smoothing his right hand up the length of his thigh. I imagine this is a preview of a maneuver he'd like to perform on me, and that he would if there weren't people in the room with us. I stay silent. I can't risk it, can't risk the
possibility of saying something stupid, something that might cost me the electricity of this moment. His leg is so close to mine, his hand millimeters away from my knee. The slightest stretch of his pinkie could change everything. My fluttering heart beats itself out of my ribs and unfurls to fly.

"Where did you say you were for the past few months? Some kind of psych ward?"

I sigh. "It was a residential treatment facility. For eating disorders."

"Like anorexia?"

I suppress a smile. "That was my diagnosis, yes."

"Mmm." He grins without his eyes. "Did you like it there?"

I shake my head. "They had, like, no funding or staffing at all. They had dieticians running group therapy, random admin people doing mental health screenings, like… it was just absolute chaos. The bedrooms had bugs in them, too. And the food was disgusting, like the most vile shit you've ever seen in your life. It was like they scooped it out of a dumpster and then pooped on it. I wouldn't have eaten it if they paid me a million dollars."

"But I bet they forced you to eat it, though."

I shake my head again. "They didn't care enough to do that. You could do whatever you wanted, and as long as you were a healthy weight," I say with air quotes, "they'd let you go. I just put rocks in my pockets when they weighed me, and they were too stupid to notice. That's how I got out."

"Is that why you're not eating your cupcake? 'Cause they couldn't, like, fix you?"

I begin to respond, but the words catch in the back of my throat. He's looking at my plate again, the cupcake I've gored into a confiture. It's not like I tried to hide it. And isn't this what I wanted, anyway? For someone to see how sick I am, how ruined I must be to intentionally
remain so sick, and feel bad for me? To think of me every time they bring a bite of food to their lips, and remember me as that one person they know, that really, really unfortunate person who can't stomach a fucking cupcake, and think, *How sad, how so, so sad, that this is their life, that they have to wake up every day in that body they hate, and live their lonely, miserable life?* Isn't that what I've desired all this time, for someone to validate all my effort, all my pain, and then pity me for it?

"Yeah, I guess so."

Jack nods, satisfied. He's pressed his legs back together, his arms folded over each other, so he's no longer even close to touching me. I feel dirty and humiliated, like a child who's just thrown up all over themselves. Jack pulls out his phone, already forgetting about me. I look over, and Phoebe is staring at us. I doubt she could hear any of our conversation, but perhaps my expression is giving me away, because she looks like she's either about to cry or break something.

Before I can say or do anything, Conan calls for everyone's attention.

"Okay, I'm going to read your guys' quiz answers now. Hopefully no one put anything embarrassing." They begin thumbing through the thin stack and reading each answer out one by one. As I expected, Allison took the assignment very seriously; her baby name suggestion is *Whiskers*, which is not only unoriginal in general but also the name of her own cat. Everyone else, for the most part, understood to write joke responses. Zulie wrote that the baby's favorite pastime is *racketeering*; Phoebe wrote that the baby's celebrity idol is *Edward Snowden*; and Anais offered *Luicy* as a name suggestion—"like Lucy, but spelled like Juicy"—which makes Conan laugh out loud.

After all the quizzes have been read through, Eileen emerges from the hall, the baby
draped over her shoulder. Anais and Zulie scramble up to greet her; Allison, Jack, and Conan follow. She's a Tonkinese cat with a pale gray coat and extremely humanlike eyes, blue as hyacinths. Everyone proffers scritches and pets while the baby squirms, torquing her back in rejection. Phoebe excludes herself from the huddle, shifting her gaze between me and the door. *Irish goodbye?* she mouths, and I nod. While everyone fawns over the baby, Phoebe and I slip out the door in silence. Everyone is too distracted to notice, but as we leave I catch the baby's eyes—she wants to come with us, whatever she is. All this attention must be like torture. We don't break eye contact until Phoebe takes my hand and the door eases shut behind us.

* * *

In the spirit of old times, Phoebe skips the turn into my neighborhood, and we tacitly agree to follow Central as far as it'll take us. Early in the summer, before I started working so much and eating so little, we carpooled to and from work, and every day the drive got longer and longer until we were spending hours in each other's cars, accumulating closeness. We always took the same route: Central to McCord to Bancroft to Ottawa Park to Monroe to Holland-Sylvania and then back around again. We'd always been friends—high school friends, then work friends—but the month before I left, our conversations acquired an urgency. She wanted to know everything about me. I felt completely, wonderfully unknowable. And then I was gone.

We pass our usual turn onto McCord. The wipers wick away the snow pelting at the windshield. Phoebe turns down the music.

"Well. That was fun. Wasn't that fun," she says.

"It certainly was something!"

She laughs, a nourishing sound. "I'm sorry. That was not how I thought it would be."

"What the actual fuck was Allison talking about for so long?"
"No, seriously. That woman needs a therapist more than anyone in the entire world, and that therapist needs to be paid a thousand dollars an hour to sit and listen to her and her elder millennial, libertarian bullshit."

"Oh! I almost forgot. Did you hear what Jack said to me?"

Her eyes widen. "Oh, God. Was it as bad as it looked?"

"Oh, so much worse. I told him about PACEDs and how shitty it was, and he asked if... um... oh, Jesus, how did he say it? He was like, 'Is that why you're not eating? Because they didn't fix you?' I was so taken aback."

"What the fuck?" She shakes her head. "That's awful. That's, like, genuinely the worst thing he could've said." She pauses, then adds, "I will never understand how he does it for you."

"Girl, shut up. Lest we forget your little obsession with Chris, of all people. Like he wasn't forty-something and married."

"Okay, that's just not fair. You know about my daddy issues."

Phoebe and I burst into laughter, but it quickly dies out, leaving only the murmur of the tires turning on the road. The drive-thrus and superstores on Central begin to thin out, replaced by electrical structures, car dealerships, and the occasional gas station. Dense thatches of deciduous trees appear and disappear at random, interrupting the view of the dormant farmlands stretching miles past either side of the road, everything white and gleaming with snow.

"Okay. I can't take it anymore," Phoebe says, out of the blue. "We need to talk about it."

"About what?"

"About PACEDs. About everything. I'm sorry, but I've been waiting for four months for you to tell me about this humongous thing that's happened to you, and you can't—"

"Okay," I interrupt. "Fine. What do you want to know?"
"Stop doing that!" she yells. "Why are you acting like that? Jesus, you've been so weird since you came back. You don't tell me anything after coming home from anorexia treatment—I mean, until a few months ago I didn't even know you had anorexia. And now you're telling Jack all about it? I mean, what is this? I'm just really confused."

I stare out the windshield. We’re almost out of Lucas County now, and the road has widened its maw to the feet of the corn stalks. There’s nothing out here anymore, just me and Phoebe and this new, unidentified third thing, sitting between us, watchful.

"I mean…” Phoebe says, quieter now. "All right, I'm not saying we have to talk about it now. But eventually, right?" I don't say anything. "Okay. Fine. Never, then. You'll never tell me anything important again, and for what? Because I can't handle it? Because you think I'll abandon you? What is it? Say something, please, because I'm trying to be there for you, but you're really not helping me out here. You went through this terrible, traumatic thing, and—"

"But what if it wasn't?"

She inhales, sharp and quick. "Huh?"

"What if it wasn't terrible or traumatic at all? What if PACEDs was actually really good for me, and they really cared about me and wanted me to improve, and they had all kinds of funding and staffing and I got state-of-the-art treatment, and it cost me all my savings but it would've been worth it, if it meant I could get better. And what if I was getting better, at least at the end? That's what they told me, anyway. That's why I'm here in the first place, since this is supposedly as good as it gets. What then?"

Phoebe tries to say something, but only manages a choked vowel sound: "Uh—"

"I don't think I want to get better anymore. I thought I did, for a little bit. Like, sometimes they'd have former residents come visit and give presentations on their recovery, or they'd show
us videos where people had been magically healed, never counting another calorie again, and that was inspiring, I guess. But also, all those people were much deeper in it than I was. They had real anorexia. One girl came in to talk to us, and when she was admitted, she'd dropped down to eighty-something pounds after being over a hundred seventy her entire life. And, like, yeah, that's really bad. That's really bad. But also, she did it. She got what she wanted. And I haven't yet."

"Okay, wait. I'm still not—"

"Listen. I know what I sound like. I sound insane. I am insane. Everyone knows it. You know it, Allison knows it. Jack knows it. It's kind of a prerequisite for this sort of thing. I'm aware of how fucked-up I am."

"That's not what I was talking about." Phoebe shifts into neutral and pulls onto the shoulder, bringing us to a full stop. "Well, no. That was what I was talking about, but only part of it. Obviously we can talk about that stuff, but I just— okay, listen. You're not insane. Not to me. But I just need—"

"No, stop, you don't get it. I don't care about being insane or not insane. I just don't want it to all be for nothing. Come on, I know you know what I'm talking about. You saw how everyone was. I told them the truth, and no one gave a shit. I told a lie, and still, no one gave a shit. All I ever wanted was for someone else to give a fuck! I mean, Jesus, I starved myself so hard that I went to the hospital, and I still get upstaged by a fucking cat. Why's no one throwing me a party? Why's no one celebrating me? I just need this all to mean something in the end. Or else what? I'm just… Allison? Sitting there, talking and talking forever, waiting for someone, anyone, to care enough to listen?"

I lock my hands in my lap, waiting for Phoebe to say something. Outside the car, the
fields are still and quiet, and the clouds have formed a cataract over the moon. She rests her chin on the steering wheel between her hands, looking at nothing.

After a while, she says, "You think I don't give a fuck?"

"I didn't mean you." She doesn't believe me. "I promise, I didn't."

"I do, for the record. I don't know how to demonstrate that any better." I start to interrupt her, but she says, "No. My turn. I don't know how to prove to you that I care. I just wish you'd tell me this stuff instead of bottling it up and acting like no one wants to help you. Because I want to help you so badly, I'm trying, but it seems like..." She takes a long breath that quavers at the end, "...like you don't want my help anyway. So now, I don't really know what to say."

I reach for the tender spot above my cheekbone. My fingers come back wet. Phoebe looks nearly the same as she did when, four months ago, she came to visit me at the hospital. She'd dragged the metal chair from the window to the side of my bed, and when I woke up, she was tracing the length of the bandage on my forearm, where the IV had been inserted. The area was sore and blue, and I flinched at her touch. She apologized. I forgave her. She told me I looked horrible. Thanks for the honesty. No problem. How horrible? She could see right through me. So she thought I was skinny? She didn't respond. I expected, almost hoped, that after a while, she would have to leave, and I'd get to be alone, but then she stayed there for the next thirty-eight hours until the nurses came to take me away. She didn't know what to say then either, though occasionally, she'd repeat herself, in a whisper that got quieter every time. She could see right through me
I had a dream last week and you were barely there. They had lined folding chairs along the walls of my high school gym, and I was on the midcourt line with a bullhorn, proselytizing. A single bare lightbulb swung above me in the rafters. You and everyone else were still and smooth as porcelain dolls. I spoke God's anger aloud like a long red breath. You all lifted the Dixie cups to your mouths. I watched you all die. I watched your necks split open and blossom with laccaria mushrooms and fruticose lichen. The room blazed with green and violet afterlife. In the dream, the sound of your decomposition was a kind of music. I thought it could lead me like a piper all the way to paradise, but I found paradise was a blue door on the other side of the world, and the world was a long anteroom with no walls or floor, and my alarm went off and I woke up on my couch and I couldn't remember what any of it meant anymore.

* * *

I enjoy Mondays. This one in particular, because I remember to make my bed, even if that only means unbunching the comforter and taking all the pillows off the floor and piling them in the middle; and because I remember to eat something, even if that something is cereal in a drinking glass because all my bowls are in the sink; and because I wait to finish my food before taking my meds, which means my appetite isn't ruined; and because I don't wait until the last possible minute to pee, as though afraid I'll spend all the energy in my body; and because I don't think of
you at all.

A while ago, I mentioned to Adrienne I like Mondays and she called me "Fargield, Garfield's evil doppelgänger." I was agog. "FARGIELD?" I said, but she only gave a disapproving look. "Of course you like Mondays, they're your only day off. That's like everyone else's Sundays," and I said, "Mondays just have a different vibe to them. I feel like a new person every Monday. Like it's New Year's Day every week," and she said, "Whatever, Fargield."

On Monday mornings, I take my meds out on the balcony. This is the only function my balcony serves, being too narrow to fit more than two people at once, and there's never a second person anyway. I swallow all three of my once-dailies in one pained gulp, drink an entire glass of water, and celebrate with a cigarette. It's chilly out today, but October chilly, Halloween-and-you're-begrudgingly-wearing-a-coat-over-your-Buzz-Lightyear-costume-chilly—not February chilly, not as bitterly cold as it's been all winter, though the blackened ice piled up like baby-proofing around the perimeter of the parking lot remains solid as quartz, immovable until May. The cigarette I light is one of five left in the pack—American Spirits. I should've saved it. I wasn't really craving it, and now I'm stuck out here in the disappointing weather, the gray clouds loafing around in the sky like a bunch of assholes waiting for someone to tell them what to do.

Sometimes, when the mood strikes, I'll drink black coffee while I smoke. I hate the taste of black coffee, and cigarettes do nothing for me, but I do like the idea of such traditional vices. I'll sit outside in the morning frost and imagine I'm a troubled, emaciated artist working out of a Tuscan pied-à-terre, miles and centuries away from reality, from my life as a college senior in Toledo with an SSRI dependency and an ingrown toenail. But my French press is in the sink with all my other dishes, and I have no desire to wash it. I consider bringing my grounds to the café to
have my coworkers make me a pour-over—something I'd kill them for doing to me during a rush—but if I'm going to all that trouble I might as well just get a latte and call it a day. Either option would necessitate I change into real clothes, a thought that repulses me.

I pour the dregs of my water into my ashtray and dump the contents over the railing, watching the soot flitter like fat black insects into the barren flower beds alongside my building. My landlord has raised my rent three times now, and it is my mission to ensure his peonies never, ever bloom. I bring inside my pill box—which, I should mention, is a Royal Dansk cookie tin with "CANDY!!!!" printed in red Sharpie on the lid, a gift from Adrienne—and I return it to its place on the nightstand. Most mornings, especially if I'm working early at the café, the stupid joy of seeing that cookie tin beside my bed is the only thing that motivates me to open it. Still, I cling to this old fantasy that, one day, I will wake up and have miraculously broken through the membrane separating me from the rest of humankind; that my pills will suddenly look like moldy leftovers, and I will be clean again. When this fantasy continues to not come true, I feel like a doomsday prophet, every day disappointed that the world is still here and I am still wrong.

I need: to clean my apartment; to finish my assignments; to go grocery shopping; to eat better; to stop spending all my money; to get my ingrown toenail checked out; to move out of Toledo; to find a better job; to find a better apartment; to send an email; to get a haircut; to lose weight; to organize my linen closet; to organize my bath cabinet; to organize my pantry; to clean out my fridge; to be a better friend to Adrienne; to be more social; to meet new people and not fuck it up; to reinvent myself; to remember you, or forget you, and to know for certain which of these choices will cure me, which one I should default to while I try to fix everything else. But mostly, I need to get a grip. Because it's all a joke, it's all shits and giggles, it's just who I am, until I no-call no-show at work again and silly me, until Adrienne can't get a hold of me for a
week and *whoopsie daisies*, until I'm unapproachable and off-putting and the second anyone calls me on it I'm *just kidding*. It's all a joke and none of it is funny, except to me, to whom everything is funny. All my days eddy around this cookie tin full of pills, little buttonholes in the cosmic fabric like miniature monocles through which, if I squint hard enough, everything comes into sudden, incredible focus; but somewhere along the way the pixels misalign and the colors invert and, the next thing I know, I'm swallowing another handful, the moment ends, and that precious, ephemeral clarity slips away from me once again. Every day, my whole life. Come on, now. Can't I be amused by this? Must my reality always render as *dour* and *disturbing* and *just plain depressing*? "Declan, we're worried about you. That's not something to joke about. We think you need to talk to someone." Spare me. We're not that close.

*  *  *

Toledo winters are not to be fucked with. Older folks say it's because of the lake, or that I should try living in Minnesota if I think it's brutal here; but I've begun to suspect winter has been sent after me, a kind of sick joke made at my lone expense. Once, in late December, I came down to the parking lot to see my car—a '98 Corolla already on the fritz—completely encased in ice. I had to use my mailbox key to chisel out the handle. Two weeks before that, while leaving class, I slipped and wiped out on a crowded pavilion. I fractured my wrist last year after falling down a flight of concrete stairs. Since November, there have been two blizzards, five spontaneous road closures due to black ice or avalanches, and one instance of the Corolla shitting itself half to death in the middle of an intersection, leaving an oily skid mark like blood on the asphalt. Last week, on my way to work, I lost control and slid into a comically enormous snowbank, which promptly capsized over my windshield, and as I struggled to push my car back onto the road, my boots filling with slush, I wondered if this was hell. If the theologians had gotten it wrong and
hell is in fact a cold, distant planet with no horizon or sky, only snowflakes between me and the end, to demonstrate how far this nothing reaches. So maybe my parents had it right: I am going to hell, and here I am now. *Hell welcomes you! Pop. 2*, the imaginary sign reads as I step through the smokescreen and the world falls away.

* * *

I'm supposed to take my Adderall every morning—my fourth once-daily. The tablets taste like limestone and the comedown is awful, and taking one does nothing while taking two makes me feel like Johnny Test. My last appointment with my psychiatrist, I tried to be proactive and told him the exact strength I felt I needed, and instead of praising me for being a good patient he looked at me like I was a meth-head and told me I should try taking my current dosage as prescribed before I started, quote, "begging for more." So now I only take it when I feel like it.

Today, I swallow two tablets and lie down for a quick nap before they kick in. My dreams are fairly standard: I'm at work, out of dress code, and I've forgotten my apron; I discover a hidden slaughterhouse behind the pastry freezer where freshly severed cattle heads lay strewn about, frozen mid-scream; and I watch Adrienne die, cinematically, from brain cancer over the course of several months. I startle awake on my couch after half an hour, snot running into my ears, feeling much worse. This is the kind of sleep I've been having recently: even after the Adderall has run its course, the window of opportunity far behind me, and I'm recycling the spit in my mouth to keep myself from driving off the road or stumbling into a parking meter, and all I can think of is my bed like a big white cloud hanging low over the road—even then, when I'm finally home and under the covers, all I can do is lie there in limbo for hours, my eyes spinning in their sockets. Then when sleep does come, so do the dreams: always brutal, always apocalyptic, always a Lovecraftian montage on the big screen in my brain, and then static.
Sometimes, you're there too.

My living room has, since the start of my nap, grown dim. I can already feel the first blushes. The mental checklist unscrolls: I need to start my laundry and take a shower before seven, which is when Adrienne and I eat dinner over FaceTime and recirculate the same old high school gossip. I need to finish all my late work for my Spanish horror cinema class so I can start studying for the Thursday midterm. I need to write three peer critiques for my creative writing class. I need to watch at least one pre-recorded lecture for my physics class, which mandates attendance and which I have not attended, even though it is my last semester and I can't afford to fail another course.

But I don't do any of this. By seven, when Adrienne calls, I'm standing barefoot on my stove with bleach spray and a rag, scrubbing the tops of my kitchen cupboards—never mind that the counters are covered in garbage and the fridge is full of moldy food. I look down at my buzzing phone, see my reflection on the screen, and stymie a gag. I have the frightened, unkempt appearance of a castaway, as though for months I've been stranded on an island, subsisting off scorpion meat and coconut water. As I dismount, I catch a whiff of my own odor and brace myself against the counter, suddenly lightheaded, and I can clearly picture myself passing out and striking my head against the oven handle, dead before I even hit the tile. *What a way to go out*, I think, imagining the sight my neighbors and the EMTs would behold when they'd discover my half-decomposed body: male, twenty-two, in poor shape, wearing a pit-stained undershirt and turquoise *Hanes* briefs with a hole on the left cheek. I decline Adrienne's call and text an excuse:

**Monday 7:03pm**

can i call you tomorrow
i just took my adderall you don't want to talk to me

YOU ARE A ROACH

YOU ARE A SICK MOTHERFUCKER

STOP YELLING AT ME

YOU CANT KEEP GETTING AWAY WITH THIS

literally FIRST thing tomorrow ill call you

hand to god ade

forgive me pls pls pls pls

ok love you gnight

Five hours later, I've cleaned my entire apartment down to the studs and done exactly none of the things on my mental checklist. Not even the laundry, the topographical hazard in the corner of my bedroom with vacuum tracks around it, which, now that I'm at the crest of my medicated delirium and tipping steadily downhill, turns my stomach to think about dealing with, particularly the part where I drag it all down to the basement and pray no one else has monopolized the laundry room at midnight on a Monday, and God forbid anyone be down there at all and I have to make small talk. I strip my clothes off my body, deposit them atop the mound, and get in the shower.

Eight months into my prescription, I feel I've finally found a rhythm with Adderall. Against my best intentions, I always start by deep-cleaning my entire apartment—which isn't necessarily unneeded but often the last thing I should be doing—and then I proceed to my coursework, though invariably I get sidelined by trivial tasks like crafting emails a hundred words too long, reorganizing my GCal, or scouring Pinterest for the perfect desktop wallpaper to
optimize mindfulness or zen or whatever. I once imagined this prescription would empower me to care more about my education. When I was a freshman—lonely, unmedicated, and working thirty-nine hours a week just to eat corn nuts and microwave pasta on the carpet every night—I dreamed of a miracle drug. School was the only promise I had, and I wanted so bad not to waste it. Now, three years later, as each day passes me over like the shadow of an immense pendulum in the sky, I am only more certain there is no cure for any of this. Even my medicated focus is unfocused, sharp bullets of effort flying every which way but the target itself.

I spend the remainder of my Monday night in the dark. After my shower—during which I perform my nightly surgery on my ingrown toenail, picking bits of cherry pulp from beneath the plate and watching them slide like grotesque little creatures down the drain—I curl up in bed with my laptop, beneath the faint glow of the Christmas lights I've yet to take down. My list of assignments is long, many pulsing red from tardiness, and I know this is meant to scare me, but all I can bring myself to do is organize the list itself, filter all those scary red assignments by class, due date, priority, estimated time to complete. I input all the assignments into a computer program which alleges on its website to be *ADHD Friendly!*—two hours later, I find I can't stand the font, and I delete it. The one time I look up from my screen, I feel all the eyes in the room—Adrienne's, in the Polaroid above my desk; Ivan the Terrible's, in the framed print above my dresser; Phoebe Bridgers', in the poster on my closet door; and my own, beside Adrienne's in the same Polaroid—snapping back into place, pretending they weren't watching me. By the time the burgundy sky outside my window begins to streak dusty pink with daybreak, my vision is foggy and all the colors are inside out, and I've written Google reviews for every restaurant I've ever eaten at, all the way back to the Red Lobster in Sandusky where I got explosively sick on my ninth birthday. As I'm digging through my laundry for a shirt to wear to work, I receive a text
from Adrienne:

**Tuesday 7:29am**

*you doing okay?*

I type and delete and retype and redelete a response, before settling on:

*yeah?*

*ok just checking roachhhhh*

*CALL ME TODAY DO NOT FORGET*

I smile so big my cheeks strain like an unexercised muscle.

I straighten the comforter on my bed, pack my pins and apron into a tote, take my once-dailies—thankful for Adrienne's text for I otherwise wouldn't have remembered—and drive to the café, where I spend the twilight of my delirium scrubbing mocha off my forearms, snaking soggy chunks of fruit out of the drains, and wishing ill upon the minivan full of teenagers in the drive thru who seem not to know we can all hear them over the headsets calling us *fat queers*. After clocking out, I nod off at the desk in the back until the shift lead, Paloma, comes by fifteen minutes later to nudge me awake and ask me to move because I'm blocking the pastry freezer, and I blow a raspberry at her and drive back to my apartment without even taking my apron off. When I get home, it's nearly two o'clock; the first of my two classes begins in half an hour. I strip down to my underwear, open my fridge, and eat just about everything in there before promptly voiding it all into the toilet with measured difficulty. Then I collapse on top of my bed, the stench
of dishwater and dead espresso seeping into my sheets as I sleep and sleep and sleep. I sleep so hard my muscles atrophy into licorice twists inside my cellophane arms. When I finally awake, my whole body is sticky and smells like a dairy fart, and on my pillow there's a small, cloudy culture of spittle where my mouth had lain slacked. It's snowing outside. I check my phone and find I've been unconscious for twenty hours, having not only slept through both my Tuesday classes but most of my Wednesday morning shift as well. I triage my notification center: first, a harrowing eighteen missed calls and thirty-three messages from Adrienne (I text her the truth: I'm not dead i fell asleep LMFAOOOO, and then, ill call you in like 5m); second, as expected, five missed calls and four messages from Paloma, who had to open the store by herself (I do nothing); third and final, one message from Ben, the store manager (Fuck). I read the preview—Declan, I understand you're having a rough semester but I think I've let things slide too many times that I don't have another choice but to—and, already knowing how it ends, I think, So I'm late a few times and miss one shift—what kind of sad, pathetic individual gives someone a write-up for something like that? and then I wonder if he would write me up if he knew who I really was, if he knew every contour of my life with the same horrible familiarity that I do, if he could look me in the face and tell by the grain of my skin all the things I've done, all the things done to me, and everything in the vast, black purgatory between.

* * *

Technically, I am not lonely. I do not ever feel loneliness, though in some capacity it does follow me like an individual stormcloud above my head. It has been, I admit, a considerable while since I've done anything with my college friends, apart from the sporadic message I send into our long dead group chat—mostly photos of people we once communally despised walking to class or waiting in line at Rice Boulevard, to which they don't respond, making me think I am now the
one being photographed and communally despised. I know they remain friends without me. I've seen them out together, or on their social media, chatting over poke bowls and bubble tea, studying at indie bookshops, getting sloshed at parties and running through crosswalks in a blurry, incorporeal mass of smoke and laughter. They've seen me too, always alone. They come through the drive-thru when I'm working, put on a song-and-dance about missing me and wishing I'd come out with them more, feign curiosity for the simulacrum of a life I've scraped together in their absence. I feel awkward around them, particularly when their niceness renders so genuine I realize the awkwardness is not mutual, that they really do not think about me that much.

I say technically because in spite of everything, I still have Adrienne.

Adrienne, who somehow has the intuition to FaceTime me the moment I get out of my Spanish exam, once again proving our jokes about being telepathically connected must contain a granule of truth. I cross the atrium in Field House and answer the call. Just as I've stepped into the frigid air, her face appears on my screen.

"OH!" she yelps immediately, propping her phone up on the kitchen counter and doing a little dancey-dance in her pajamas. "YES YES YES YES YESSSS!"

"Oh my god, freak, have I got a story for you."

"Oh my god, freak, so! Do! !" She jabs her finger at the camera with each word. "You go first."

After I've started my car and blasted the heat, I begin telling Adrienne about my Spanish exam: how there was no multiple choice even though the practice exam was all multiple choice; how I'm just now realizing I used pero instead of sino on the comparar/contrastar essay question; how I left the last prompt completely blank just so I could leave early; and how my
professor noticed this as I was walking out the door, called to me, "Declan, ven acá. Mira, me parece que no tienes nada para esta última pregunta. ¿Quieres intentarla?" and I didn't understand her at first so I responded, "Sí, sí, ¡gracias!" thus sealing my fate. As I recount each detail to Adrienne, she fills the gaps with arpeggios of laughter and quick riffs of affirmation, and each one is like the first sip of cherry pop from a styrofoam cup, a summer breeze rustling through pine groves the color of Granny Smith apples, the held breath between songs, the feeling of driving hundreds of miles a day just to feel like you're going somewhere.

"So, methinks another win for Declan." I make a sketchy lane change. A TARTA bus chugs alongside me, and from one of the windows an old woman in a hot-pink beanie gives me the stink-eye.

"Oh, yes, and you deserve it."

"I think I'm going to take my Adderall tonight, after my creative writing class."

"No, babes, no!" Adrienne says, half laughing, half whining. "What happened to I'm gonna take my Adderall in the morning, every day?" She imitates me with a Philly drawl. "Health and wellness, remember?"

"Health and wellness my ass, girl. I'm behind on everything." I make another lane change and receive a long, unpleasant honk from the Escalade behind me. "Get fucked, shit-ass! Anyways. My GPA is digging itself a grave as we speak."

"'Shit-ass?' You can't just make up words."

"Girl, they were so far up my ass my tonsils were itching."

"Declan," Adrienne says, which makes me flinch. She never calls me by my name unless it's serious. "I'm on my hands and knees begging you to take your Adderall in the morning. Seriously. I really don't get what's so hard about it. Just take it with your other meds. Easy-peasy.
Otherwise, you're not graduating, because… if you're already *that* behind in February…"

"I know," I say. "But—"

"And before you say anything, I'd rather you be a zombie for, like, two more months than have to take summer classes. I can't handle this for a whole other semester."

The part of it Adrienne doesn't even register is that I have no savings, barely enough in my checking account to cover my March rent, and if I don't graduate this semester I won't graduate at all. I can't afford summer classes. I can't even afford the seven-and-a-half semesters I've already taken. All my emails from Sallie Mae go straight to junk.

"Speaking of meds," Adrienne continues, with a suggestive edge, "what about your SSRIs? Have you taken those today?"

"Yes," I lie. The truth is: I haven't touched my pill box since Tuesday morning. I was so nervous about missing my shift again that, last night, I set sixteen alarms between four and four-thirty a.m. and only woke up on the fourteenth, and was running on fumes until about an hour into my shift whereupon I remembered what it was I'd forgotten to do. But I'm okay for now. I don't have the urge to worry Adrienne about it. "Yeah, I took them today."

"You're so full of shit."

"I am not!" I say, though there's no use anymore. "It's the quack's fault."

"Oh, fuck the quack."

"The *quack* has been stingy recently. He won't up any of my dosages. Not for lack of trying—I did ask. I said all the right things. And he might as well have called me a junkie and spit on me. I think he really does want me to kill myself. One less thing for him to worry about."

"All I'm hearing is that you, A, believe you need a higher dosage, and B, haven't been taking the shit you already have. Am I getting this right?"
"Uh..." I mumble. "Um. Well, the thing is..."

"Go on."

Uncertainly, I say, "Don't dull my sparkle?"

Adrienne brays with laughter, though there's a tinge of forcedness behind it, as though she, too, is desperate to change the subject. Then she says, "Oh, let me tell you about my day."

As she narrates her morning—her roommate Olivia blaring a yoga podcast from their Google Nest, waking her up; the fifty-year-old GSI in her o-chem lab squeezing her waist while passing behind her; and her accidentally asphyxiating a stray coffee bean through the straw in her Sweetwaters iced chai—I realize I don't think I can live without her. And I mean that in the most literal sense possible: her presence in my life is like a vital organ, as integral to my survival as my heart or lungs. When I go more than a day or two without speaking to her, I begin to feel physically ill, as though somewhere within me our friendship has spontaneously grown a tumor.

It's silly, really, how much I depend on these conversations that really just boil down to indecipherable babble and laughter for the sake of laughter. But I really do believe they're the only thing keeping me breathing.

*   *   *

This is the one week I need my creative writing class to end as early as possible, so I can get enough sleep before my five a.m. shift tomorrow. Of course, since my abject misfortune is the gift that keeps on giving, the workshop ends up running half an hour late. I spend the majority of those three-and-a-half hours stomping on my ingrown toenail and typing out random words into an empty Google Doc to simulate engagement: Alistair, Anagram, Aljazeera, Abercrombie & Fitch, Abalone, Astoria, America Ferreira.

On the conference table: fifteen copies of a quasi-novella about a forbidden romance
between a sixteen-year-old boy and a forty-something-year-old man, who meet in an online chat room for ephebophiles, and *sparks fly! At the story's climax, the boy's parents discover evidence of their sordid affair: several hundred photos of the boy and his ribbed throat, the man and his stubby erection. Thus ensues a dramatic and gratuitous showdown, in which the parents destroy the boy's belongings and abandon him like an old dog on the side of the road with nothing but the clothes on his back.

When the professor asks us to initiate discussion, there's a full minute of silence until Anais—the girl to my left, who always pins her hair back with a pair of monarch butterfly barrettes—announces the story made her cry.

"Not, like, full-on heaving and sobbing, but still. I definitely teared up. I don't know." She drums her pen on the conference table. "It was just so much. I felt… I don't even know how I felt. It was like a really bad case of motion sickness. I'm sorry that's not, like, the most helpful feedback." She pauses, drums her pen a few more times, and continues, "It was really impactful, that's all."

*Usurp, Undulation, Umbrage, Uninitiated, United, Uvula, Umpire, Uma Thurman.*

Someone else raises his hand—a guy whose name I can never remember—and says, "I actually disagree with that last part."

The workshop ends up splitting into two distinct factions. Some people claim the story is too sad, too bloated with evil and misery and hopelessness, too veiny with unnecessarily graphic details, to be believable; others find it entirely believable for mostly the same reasons. Eventually, the discussion becomes so estranged from the story itself that upwards of ten minutes pass without the mention of a single character or plot point. No one waits to be called on anymore. The professor has all but forfeited her dominion over the class, and spends the whole
time twiddling her thumbs and nodding her head periodically to feign attentiveness. Meanwhile, I challenge myself with world capitals by the alphabet: Accra, Beirut, Canberra, Dushanbe, I can't think of an E, Freetown, Guatemala City.

It's at the moment when the class has been over for twenty minutes and half of us are clutching our backpacks, waiting for mutual permission to leave, that Anais rocks back in her chair and shouts over the din of those still arguing, "You people are denser than fucking rocks. I truly mean that."

I leave the conference room feeling motion-sick myself. Every step forward sends a bolt of nausea up my throat, and whenever I look up at the panel lights in the ceiling, ringed with chartreuse haloes, I swear they're breathing, bugging out to the rhythm of my throbbing eyes. When I reach the building's atrium and push open the glass doors, a sharp gale of wind lashes across my face, and I feel a bit better. It's nine o'clock now. The snow is really coming down, the parking lot a frosted mirror of the sky. Every step toward my car is a gamble with my life. The invisible horizon, the copse of dead conifers—everything swoons and ripples like a curtain fluttering over something hiding behind it. *Just a little longer, it's okay, just keep going.*

Overhead, the tungsten moon glistens like the teary eye of God.

* * *

An Abbreviated List of Times Adrienne Has Saved My Life,

Whether She Knows It or Not:

*(in order of chronology)*

1. Seven years ago. We were sitting on the floor in the freshman corridor. It was me, her, and all
of her friends who had become my friends by association, and because I didn't have any of my own anyway. I must have been eating a peanut butter sandwich because I remember there being an immutable blob of something creamy on my chin that, no matter how many times I wiped off, would inevitably reappear upon my next bite. She called me a roach and performed a mock stroke test on me, to which I told her to go to hell and she burst out laughing. One of Adrienne's friends, Kayla, cooed at us as though we were a pair of squabbling babies. "You guys are soooo cute together. You're just adorable." Adrienne stared at her. "We're not a thing. We're best friends. Learn the difference." Kayla frowned and said, "That's weird." And Adrienne said, in a low voice, "Kayla, you're ugly and you smell bad, and I think that's even weirder." Best friends, I remember repeating over and over in my head until the words meant nothing and everything at the same time.

2. Five years ago. Ever since Adrienne and I were in fifth grade, her only work experience had been the occasional babysitting job and a brief stint as a cart girl at a country club, but halfway through our junior year, she decided, on a whim, to apply to work at the Panera Bread down the road from our high school. She didn't need the money, but thought it would look good on college apps to have worked in food service. On the last day of school that year, instead of waiting by the flagpole for our parents to pick us up, she took me to the student lot, where she revealed she'd cashed in all her wages to buy a used '98 Corolla. Instead of going home, we muted our phones and drove down to Cedar Point just for the hell of it. We got there before sunset but never made it into the park. We just sat in the parking lot with the windows rolled down and tracked the sun's slow plunge from the cloudy ether into Lake Erie, curled small in our seats, our shoes kicked into the back, blowing the Corolla's speakers out with songs whose lyrics we didn't know but sang
anyway, nothing better to do and nowhere better to be.

3. Four years ago. A Tuesday afternoon. I came home from school to the sight of my laptop smashed across the kitchen floor and my parents sitting at the table with blood in their eyes, and I knew. The day I learned it was untrue, after all, to say I was loved unconditionally; that even real love is fickle, meant to be given and taken away. The day I was disinterred like a dead animal and held up to the surgical light of judgment like some shriveled, wicked thing. The day I lost it all: my bed, my books, my vinyls, my childhood artwork, my medals and trophies; my seat at the dinner table, my spot on the couch, the towels and mugs and baby shoes all marked mine with the letter D; my parents, my neighbors, my dog, my home, myself. The day I walked a mile-and-a-half to Adrienne's house, a black outline against the burning western sky, because I had nowhere else to go. When she came to the door, I knew I must've looked like shit because her face turned the color of concrete and she started crying before I could say anything. That day, and every day thereafter, I was not alone. I lived with her family until I could afford an apartment. I shed my past like a snakeskin and learned how to hide the sores that still remained. She refused to let me look back.

4. Three-and-a-half years ago. We spent the rest of our senior year, and the entirety of that summer, clinging to each other as though in a nosedive. When she officially committed to Michigan, I was there, fighting back tears with her parents and sisters, wondering how I'd ever survive living so far from her; and when I started my job, she'd come in just to sit at a café table and make faces at me until the end of my shift, and I'd make us a pair of high-maintenance drinks to sip on while we gallivanted around Toledo. We put hundreds of miles a day on that
Corolla, driving in circles, talking about any and everything imaginable—our childhoods; our dreams; our opinions on the death penalty; our demented fantasies for how our enemies' lives would turn out; what we'd do if we got in a wreck right now; what the hell is wind and how does it work; why April is purple but May is yellow and March, of course, is green—until the lines began to blur and we began to morph into the same exact person, displaced over two bodies.

5. The last day of summer, before leaving for Ann Arbor, Adrienne gave me the keys to the Corolla. "I'm not going to use it," she said, as though this were a gift out of convenience more than anything else. "And you would be a real dingoid to attend a commuter school without a car."

*   *   *

I don't dream when I fall asleep on Thursday night. In fact, by four-thirty when my sixteenth alarm goes off and I wake up, I feel like I haven't slept at all. I'm no better-rested than if I'd just taken my Adderall like I said I would and finally did all my laundry, which has since Monday acquired a gangrenous musk. I don't stop scowling until I arrive at work, when Paloma, clearly disappointed I wasn't fired after Wednesday morning, asks me to look like I enjoy being there, to which I reply, "That's above my pay grade."

What should be a four-hour baby shift passes at the speed of erosion. Every customer in the drive-thru is blitheringly stupid; at one point, after trying and failing to explain to an older man that we are not, in fact, a Five Guys, and no, we can't, quote, "just make him a burger anyway," Paloma crouches down behind the counter and puts her head between her knees and stays like that until a different customer comes up to the register and informs us someone has
stomped a shit into the bathroom drain. On my break, I open two new texts from Adrienne—*are you doing okay you didn't call last night*, and, thirty minutes after the first, *??????*—and I respond, *yes but i have a rant to tell you when i get off. im going to kill someone and at this point it might be me*. She replies instantly, *not funny not funny*. I spend the last two hours of my shift complaining to Paloma about my ingrown toenail, which has recently begun to secrete pus; she asks me not to share these things with her again. At nine, I clock out and stumble to my car like a drunk leaving the bar at sunrise. The feeling follows me the whole way home, as I putter along against the current of all the well-adjusted people embarking upon their well-adjusted days.

When I arrive at my apartment, I change into my Spongebob pajama pants and pass out before I have the chance to call Adrienne back. My dreams are vivid and pastoral—prairies of blond heather, milky clouds against a polyester sky, a quasar sun. I startle awake some time later, my room an indeterminate shade of night, to the sound of my Christmas lights burning out: a sharp *pop* and then the twinkle of broken glass, dying embers swirling in the bulbs. When I catch my reflection in the mirror across my bed, I'm grimacing, insulted to be alive.

I don't even bother checking the time. I know only three things: one, I want microwave waffles; two, I do not have any microwave waffles; and three, somewhere out there in the indigo, there's a Walmart that sells microwave waffles. I put on my coat in the dark, rub lidocaine cream on my toenail, and drag myself down the stairs to my car, clutching the railing for dear life as I glide over the frozen metal slats.

When I arrive at Walmart, it's busy, which surprises me considering how treacherous the commute here was. I find a parking spot close enough to the front that I only slip once on the way in, catching myself and making a quasi-distraught face for the humor of nobody, the same way one might try to shake the embarrassment of farting in public. Around me, family units
travel like solar systems, children in enormous jackets orbiting their mothers like neon planets; they grab for the same cart, the same disinfecting wipe, the same freezer door as me, and we exchange murmured apologies, smiling perfunctorily as though this were the only positive interaction with a stranger we've had all winter. Or maybe I'm just projecting.

As I'm standing in the frozen foods aisle, fucking with the Eggo products and deliberating the consequences of wearing my Spongebob pajama pants in public, I'm struck with the sense someone is staring at me. I look to my right, and there's a woman sitting criss-cross-applesauce on the ground, studying the nutritional facts on a box of microwave corn dogs. I look to my left, and there's a man about ten feet away. He's about my age, wearing carpenter jeans, a Canada Goose parka, and a single silver stud glimmering like a star from behind his overgrown hair. He looks familiar, but I can't place him. As soon as I look, he averts his eyes up toward the aisle marker floating above my head like a plumbob.

I turn back to the ajar freezer door and wonder if he was really staring at me. My first thought is, Of course, because I secretly do feel most desirable when I'm visibly at my lowest. Who wouldn't want me? My second thought is I need to get the dosage upped on one of my once-dailies. When I look again, the man is walking toward me. I freeze.

"Declan, right?" he says. He has a beautiful voice.

"Yeah?"

"You're in my creative writing class. I'm Jamie."

"Oh." I don't want to sound like a dick, but that's how it seems to be coming across. For some reason, it's never occurred to me that my classmates exist outside of our one shared environment. I've always assumed their lives revolve much more tightly around school than mine, to the point that they have no civilian responsibilities. Seeing them out and about in the
wild is troubling, like an iPhone in a period piece. "Sorry, I didn't realize who you were at first."

"No worries at all. I don't pay a lot of attention in that class anyway, but you sit across from me and..." He pauses for a moment, mustering something to say. "I just wanted to say hi."

"Oh, okay. Sorry, you scared me for a second. I'm not usually—I mean, I usually look better than this." I gesture to my Spongebob pants, which makes him laugh. It's more high-pitched than I'm expecting, which I hope means it's genuine.

"Ohmygod, you're fine." He gives a pacifying flick of his wrist, which, I notice now, has a cluster of Taylor Swift friendship bracelets coiled around it. On the one closest to his hand, the beads spell EVERMORE. He gestures to his own clothes. "I'm just getting some stuff for a thing I'm going to. That's the only reason I'm presentable at all. Usually I come here dressed like a scrub."

"Well, you look good," I say, without even thinking. "I mean, like, it's a good outfit." Which I wouldn't know, because he's wearing a coat. I want to kill myself in front of him.

"No, yeah, right," he says, hanging onto the end of the word as though about to say something else, but nothing comes. In the brief silence, the piercing cry of a baby streaks above us like an eagle. "That's all. I just recognized you and wanted to say hello."

"Thank you." What the fuck, Declan? Who says that? What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck? "It was nice to see you," I amend, with a polite wave.

"Likewise."

We begin to part ways, and I feel my body slowly exhale, the bands of anxiety cinching each organ releasing and slithering away. But then I see him, from the corner of my eye, spin around on the heels of his boots.

"Oh, one more thing, I forgot," he says, a little louder now that he's farther away. "I
wanted to say that I really loved your story this week."

"Oh," I say, stupidly.

"Yeah, I didn't get to say anything in class, but I really enjoyed it. In a genuine way, not in, like, a workshoppoy way."

"Okay. Thank you."

I expect him to say something else, but he only nods, pulls his phone out, and walks away, for real this time. I don't watch him go. I grab a box of waffles and march in the opposite direction out of the aisle like I have somewhere to be. On my way to the front, I pick up a box of replacement Christmas lights. On the off-chance Jamie can still see me, or is spying on me from afar to get a better glimpse of the interior of my life, I grab a few more things to make myself seem like an actual adult: a set of salad bowls, a pack of AA batteries, a single lightbulb in a cardboard cage, a synthetic cactus in a plastic pot made to look like terracotta.

As I shuffle to my car with my thirty dollars' worth of shit I don't need, I imagine calling my mom. As I pull out onto Central, I imagine venting to her about the encounter with Jamie, relaying every mundane detail, reiterating over and over that I know how dumb it is to be this flustered by such a short, perfectly innocent, if awkward, conversation with someone I don't even know. I imagine her saying something mom-corny—"Creative writing, wears jewelry, listens to Taylor Swift? Well, he sounds like the whole package, sweetheart"—instructing me to get his number or find him on Instagram or something, and asking me, at the very end, how I'm doing, how my last year of college is going, whether I'm having fun, whether I've made any new friends. I imagine telling her the truth, or an embellished version of it to ease her worries. I imagine her listening, commenting, giving me advice completely unsolicited. I imagine her ending the call telling me she loves and misses me. I imagine saying it back.
I pull into my parking lot, find a spot near the perimeter, and turn off the interior lights before they even have the chance to come on. I pull my knees up to the steering wheel, lean forward to hug it, rest my forehead on the horn, constrict, release, sniffle, constrict, open my mouth, let a small whisper of sound escape my throat, smear the wetness of my cheeks on the sleeve of my coat, release, stare through the windshield into the clearing behind my apartment, realize those swollen pink eyes in the reflection are mine, constrict again, hold on for as long as I can. At some point, it starts to feel like a real shoulder beneath me, a real body I'm clinging to, and though this is impossible I am briefly capable of imagining otherwise. What a funny thing.

* * *

**Friday 10:01pm**

*are you still awake?*

* * *

The workshop story ended with you, the boy, alone, standing cold and bruised in the deckle-edged winter sun as your father's truck cruised soundlessly down the road, out of the tenderest corner of the earth. An act of mercy, he had reminded you through the passenger window, since if it were up to your mother you'd be in a special psych ward where animals like you went to get corrected, or a camp where they'd beat and rape and sterilize the gay out of you. You were to consider yourself lucky to be spared such a fate. The one-lane highway went on forever in both directions, flanked by infinite forests of dead pines, and soon you couldn't remember which way you'd come from and which way you were headed. It was like standing between two mirrors reflecting off each other, you remarked, and if you looked hard enough, you
saw yourself there too, hundreds of doppelgängers projected for miles into the twin horizons of the past and the future.

* * *

**Friday 10:22pm**

*ade.*

*please.*

*wake up i need to talk to you.*

*please im so serious*

* * *

The workshop story ended abruptly, and no one was satisfied with it. They all wanted more. More to love, more to hate. More resolution, more cohesion, more sensation. More evidence that you did or did not deserve the hand you were dealt. Everyone wanted a story that would nourish them, teach them something useful, captivate and release them on command: the kind of story that slides down the throat slick and easy, like a pill one never chokes on.

* * *

**Friday 10:56pm**

*i love you adrienne*

* * *

The workshop story ended the way it did because the writer was bitter that there's nothing
entertaining about the real story at all. Anais wouldn't have cried at the real story. Jamie wouldn't have complimented the real story. The real story hasn't even ended yet. Who wants to read an unfinished story? Especially one that keeps dragging on, reiterating its point, pacing in circles until the reader gets motion-sick. It isn't clever anymore. The real story is getting tedious. The real story is getting sad. Someone please tell the writer to stop writing, already. We're moving on.

*   *   *

**Friday** 10:57pm

*Read at 10:57pm*

did you really just text me "read at 10:57 pm"??

what is the matter with you??????

*Read at 10:58pm*

ade.

you are on thin ice

now you know what it FEELS like

dingoid roach buthole

ur are a buttholee and i am howling at the moon.

awooo

omg

are you drunk

friday friday gotta get down on friday

whoever wrote that song was on a special kind of crack

ahead of her time
are you at a party

i have to puoke

puoke

im going to puck on olivias bed ugly ugly girl

it's what she deserves

ok sorry i said anything enjoy ur night

wait wait wait

girl huh

you're an hour away

it's so late

i know ur fucking lyingggg bitchhhhhhhhhhh

BIIIIITCCHHHHHHHHH

where would i sleep

mister man we will figur it out

if you are not here in an hour i will throw a tantrum

omg

wait actually

are you sure

YES

hm

ok i'll be there in an hour
OMG YES YES YES YES YES YES YES YES
we gonna PARTYYYYY

omg wtf

they're playing motion sickness

like a trap remox of motion sickness

who tf plays phobe bridgers at a party like great now im suicidal

* * *

I'm still shivering when I arrive at Adrienne's apartment. Traveling up US-23, the snow only worsens, hurtling from the lavender fog at my windshield like gunfire; and when I reach downtown Ann Arbor, the sidewalks are slick with gray sludge. I call Adrienne once in the parking garage—she doesn't pick up—and a second time beneath the subway glow of the Michigan Theater marquee—she picks up, and when I ask her to prop a door open so I can get inside, she says "okie dokie," belches, and hangs up.

I locate her unit on the fourth floor; the door is already unlocked. I step into the miasma of dust and smoke commingling in the humid air, colored violet by the LED strips along the ceiling. As I shake off the snowflakes and watch them flurry around me, they appear bioluminescent in the light. Adrienne's roommate, Olivia, is curled up beneath a hideous afghan on the living room couch, her box-ginger hair spilling over the armrest and grazing the floor.

I enter Adrienne's room. She's sitting upright against her bed, lolling her head against the bunched white duvet, swirling the spotty remains of a bottle of Pink Whitney with one hand and gripping a CVS bag with the other. There's glitter in her hair, sparkling like the snow in mine. Her eyelids are smudged fuschia, and there's a single displaced rhinestone dangling like a booger
from her nostril. When she looks up at me, her eyes are wet and full of stars.

"Oh, looord," she groans with a hooked smile. "What did you do?"

Her speech is not nearly as slurred as I imagined it would be. I sit beside her on the floor, clear a space in the shallow beach of crumbs, and lean on my hands. She gestures to a half-drunk bottle of dragonberry rum on her nightstand; I drink from it in rote swigs like cold medicine. Like me, she has Christmas lights pinned up along the ceiling, and a nostalgic glow burns at the center of the room like a campfire. The vinyl wood is smooth and cool; dust bunnies scamper in circles beneath her bed. "I haven't done anything yet," I say.

"Well, that's good," she says through a low burp. "I've done too much. Maxed out for the night. When was the last time you were here?"

"I haven't been here before."

She sits upright—I didn't notice she's been slowly keeling over the whole time—and gives me a look of pure, lucid bewilderment. "Nuh-uh. Yes, you have. Remember, um… uh… you were here for Labor Day. Right?"

"I worked on Labor Day," I shrugged.

"What about your birthday?" She looked wounded. "Oh, for fuck's sake, you were here, I remember, we mixed Malibu and red Gatorade, and… oh, what were you wearing…?"

"I don't know who you know that shares my birthday, but that was not me."

"WHAT THE FUCK?"

I burst out laughing.

"You're suchafuckingrooooaaaaach," she blabbers. "Okay. Apartment tour! I need to show you… Fuck, you… uh, hold on, um…" She burps again. "You haven't met my neighbors yet, have you? No, that's right, you, uh… They're all across the hall, I have to introduce you."
"I met Olivia."

She makes a face like someone farted. "Olivia? Where?"

"She's in the living room by herself." I point to the door, but Adrienne's eyes don't follow. "Doesn't she have her own room? What is she doing out there?"

"Oh, I threw up on her bed."

"YOU ACTUALLY DID THAT?" I yell, recoiling a little at my volume, as though the party down the hall isn't making the whole building quake.

"I don't care. She's ugly and smells bad."

We both laugh. Then a few long moments pass without either of us saying anything. The distant Eurodance unce unce unce reminds me of something I can't exactly identify, some inky dark mass of memory like an eyeless pupil dripping with itself. The further Adrienne withdraws into her own alcohol-induced delirium, the closer the mass gets to an actual definition, like liquid resin creeping toward the edges of a mold. I shut my eyes, and I can hear the ocean, however far it is from here: frothy green waves mounting, cresting, falling, crashing.

"What do you mean, you haven't done anything yet?"

Adrienne has fully slumped over onto her side, staring across the white fur rug and tousling the synthetic fibers with her pointer finger. When I don't respond immediately, she changes the question: "Why don't you visit me more?"

I pause to think. "I don't know."

"You're always invited. I would literally never say no."

"I have work and school and stuff."

"Don't give me that."

"Ade, I really don't know."
She sighs and rolls onto her back. "Okay," she says. "Why did you come here tonight?"

"Because you asked me to."

"Why did you say yes?"

"I don't know." I trace a knot in the floor with my pinkie. "I wanted to see you."

"Please tell the truth."

"I'm not lying."

"I didn't say you were."

"Oh, Adrienne."

I stand up, swooning with motion sickness. I try to breathe, but the inhales are shallow and the exhales come out in tiny, labored groans. My mouth falls open like a broken part but nothing comes out. I want to talk, I want to tell her everything I feel, but the consonants all coagulate in my throat like a plaque, and even if I could scrape them out, I have no idea what I'd say. I am trying to verbalize something for which there are no words.

"Did you know it's been four years?"

Adrienne, still on her back, tilts her head upward, as much as it takes for her eyes to narrow on mine. "To the day?"

I check my phone. It's past midnight, now Saturday. "Exactly to the day. February 25th."

"Oh, god." She pushes herself up onto her arms. The corners of her eyes bloom with fuschia teardrops. "Oh my god, I didn't even realize."

"And I just... I'm so tired of this, Adrienne, it's exhausting." My voice cracks when I say her name. "I'm so fucking exhausted. I'm sick to death of washing the same dirty hands every day, and of time passing but nothing ever changing."

"No no no no no, Declan, Declan, listen to me."
"I miss it all the time. I would be eighteen again in a heartbeat, just to start all over." I breathe in and out. "Isn't that absolutely horrible? To miss being young and so miserable?"

"Please, Declan, listen to me," Adrienne repeats, staggering to her feet like a skeleton coming to life. But I don't. She reaches for my hands, but her touch is freezing cold and I wrench away. She's talking really fast but every word is scrambled and waterlogged, as though I'm sinking to the ocean floor, her open palms at the surface falling up and away. I turn from her. I can hear her crying. She must feel so useless. She must think this is all her fault. Outside, the sky above Ann Arbor is black as a television screen, a ring of clouds around the velvet dimple where the moon is supposed to be. Not even an hour ago, it was snowing like there'd be no spring. For a moment, this is all there is: a universe's worth of emptiness, and the most peculiar sense that nothing lasts forever. Not even this. I shiver all over with a feeling I haven't felt in years.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to extend my gratitude to the members of the University of Michigan 2024 Capstone in Creative Writing: those who have inspired me, who have rallied alongside me, who have shared with me the idiosyncratic torment of writing an entire thesis in one semester, and who have become lifelong connections to this insular world. I would like to further thank the members of my workshop, Nico Magana, Grace Metcalf, Hannah Steenhagen, and Austin Stout: you guys are incredible writers with such inventive minds. I can't wait to see all our names one day, together again on the same bookstore shelf, because that's how the alphabet works.

And to the incredible English faculty at the University of Michigan: Gina Brandolino, Julie Buntin, Cat Cassel, Peter Ho Davies, Gabe Habash, Danny Hack, Shelley Manis, Tish O'Dowd, Scott Poulson-Bryant, Taylor Schey, John Whittier-Ferguson, and Andrea Zemgulys—all of whom to some extent or another have shaped my writing for the better. You are why my student loan debt is worth it. Thank you all.

And to David Ward, my second reader. You were my first ever creative writing professor, forever ago when I had no direction in my craft. Then you gave me a path forward. It was in your intro class that I wrote the first short story I ever liked—a story I detest now, which I think goes to show how far I've come. Nearly four years later, my thesis has come to life in your hands. Many of these stories would suffer that familiar fate were it not for your endless insight and careful guidance, the gifts that keep on giving. Thank you, thank you.
And to Cody Walker, my first reader. In another life, I took your poetry workshop in my freshman year and ended up on an entirely different path, writing a fifty-page thesis of sonnets and villanelles and nonce forms. Alas, my soul was sold to fiction by the time you taught me poetry. But all I have learned from you—from a medium I formerly wanted nothing to do with—cannot be put into words, even by me, a now-certified practitioner of words. When you read my sentences and tell me, "Here, this—this is poetry. This is your poet brain," the windows in my heart bare their open mouths to the sun in a deafening chorale. There, that—that is poetry. That is my poet brain. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

To my family, who wanted me to be a lawyer, a statistician, a diplomat, a translator, something impressive and lucrative: oh, well. You tried. There's still tomorrow, and all the days after. And no, that character is not based on you, nor that one. Unless it's a positive similarity, in which case, you're welcome. I love you all. Thank you for everything.

And, finally, to Claire, alias Rat, alias Boochie, alias Miss Girl, alias et. al. When you read these stories, know that I am always writing my way to you. Somewhere out there, there is a duplex for us, a reading couch on the porch, a sky in perpetual golden hour. A year-round Christmas tree in the atrium, a baker's dream kitchen with a taupe backsplash. Two crabby old viragos like us could find a life there, don't you think? Perhaps, when we reach it, I will not need to write anymore. I will have found what I am writing toward. Until then…

** THE END **
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex McCullough is an American writer. He spent half his childhood in his birthplace of Toledo, Ohio, and the other half in Salisbury, Maryland; he considers both places his hometowns. He is of Greek and Irish descent. He is a graduate of the University of Michigan, with a B.A. in English and a Capstone in Creative Writing. He has written both fiction and poetry for Canopy Magazine, and is the recipient of a Caldwell Poetry Award as well as a 2024 finalist for the Hopwood Undergraduate Poetry Award. He lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Motion Sickness is his debut story collection.